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WHY DO YOU TALK LIKE THAT?

Why Do You Talk Like That?

Not to Mention:

Why Do You Write That Way?

BY

RICHARD BURTON

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To

RUTH GUTHRIE HARDING

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THE WORD BEFORE

Words and all their ways in English can be regarded from two distinct points of interest. They may be studied in respect of their subjection to rules and regulations, their correctness or propriety, and if so, we talk of linguistics, philology or grammar. But they may also, for most perhaps more agreeably and fruitfully, be dealt with as counters in the great game of expression and self-expression. When this is so, questions of better or worse, rather than right or wrong, come into consideration, and we have in mind such things as style, creative endeavor in the handling of the tongue, and the paths whereby one who uses English may attain to mastery. These literary aspects of English, if you will, are so fascinating, so endlessly arouse pursuit and, if we be so lucky, win capture, that in a book like the present one, aiming at intelligent discussion of English as a medium of thought and instrument of expression, predominant space has been given to such considerations.

Language, it will be seen on reflection, is the

great unifier of it all, however far afield one may roam in this study. Language is not only a tool in the hand of the workman of Letters, but quite as truly, the only vehicle in the minds or mouths of earth's lowliest by which communication with their fellows can be attained. Language—whether the scholar be pursuing the umlaut, or a gangster, with the argot of his following, be giving the password to a pal—is a gift of God by the use of which man raises himself above the animal creation. It is a perpetually alluring, complex, difficult quest whenever we would catch its significance, set down its habits, or rejoice in its triumphs as music wings its feet, and the great thought of some artist among men is caught in its shimmering web.

Such a subject, infinite in its ramifications, delightful in its exhibitions, can not become dull in treatment,—unless dullards have to do with it. In the following treatment of various aspects of the large theme, I have assumed this larger unity, paying small attention to a distinction at best pedagogic and verbal, a convenience rather than an essential in the discussion conducted in the interests of speech uses as they are vital to people in general. Philology is a science. But language, for human beings at large, is a practical utility, and, rising above utility, and having pleasure as an aim, it becomes an

art. Either as art or utility, it surely is a business of moment to many besides the specialist. We owe it to such a subject, so universal in its interest and application, not to swamp it with terminology, nor suck it dry of life-blood, substituting a skeleton for a living organism.

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CHAPTER I

THE POWER OF THE WORD

RUDYARD KIPLING has given his latest volume the odd, arresting title, *A Book of Words.* It is made up of some thirty speeches delivered by him on set occasions, in various parts of the world, during the twenty-one years between 1906 and 1927. The name he chose for this collection of addresses gives us pause. It is intended to convey the idea that whatever of significance and value such a series of utterances may have, is founded in the power of the word,—in this case, the spoken word, coming direct to his hearers from the mouth of Kipling, famous weaver of tales, equally famous weaver of the rhythmic patterns and imaginative figures to which we give the name of poetry.

The power of the Word; let it be capitalized to imply its reality, its strength, its illimitable influence upon mankind. Kipling does not mean to imply that the man of word is, over against the man of deed, a mere talker instead of a doer, secondary therefore in significance to the practical man. On the contrary, he rests proudly on the title of a man-of-the-word, knowing, as he does, that a word is a deed. Nothing is surer or truer. Back of the red deed that we call the French Revolution were the so-called French Encyclopedists, men whose fiery word inflamed the nation into such realization of the idea of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality, as to bring on the debacle of 1789 itself. In 1859, Darwin ejected into the thinking world of science the concept of evolution, and no greater deed, in changing our whole notion of the life of man on this earth and accordingly the doings of men, can be chronicled during the nineteenth century. When the Renaissance vitally affected the thought of England, it meant that the mighty Word uttered by the greatest minds of Greece, supplemented by the Word which embodied the stalwart thought of the Romans who belonged in the intellectual purple, was permeating English culture, to result in a fructifying of all the art and literature of that race such as has seldom occurred at any time in the history of man

on this planet. Again, the power of the Word to change human Fate. Any implied antagonism or contrast between the word and the deed, then, is shallow and misleading. In the deepest sense, a word *is* a deed, for anything is a deed which, when done, effects alteration in the thought and therefore the activity of men as they develop their individual or their corporate lives in what is termed society.

This consideration brings us to full realization of what the Word is in human life. Trace the process. A human being thinks a thing, and finds a word to express it. That is the beginning of wisdom. He then thinks something about the thing, and, lo, a thought, as the word, with other sister words, is woven into a sentence. All learning, all development of society, finds its genesis right there. No less a modern philosopher than John Dewey declares: "I believe that the identification of knowing and thinking with speech is wholly in the right direction." No wonder we incline to deify this mystic vocable, the Word, since its entrance into the world meant that mankind by its use could and would lift themselves up until they might make proud claim of being but little lower than the angels. "In the beginning was the Word," declares John, striving to describe the origin of all things. Viewed not as theology, but as a poetic

statement of man's arrival and growth to his present stature, it is in sooth a noble description! "And the Word was God,"—yes, because the Word, of all things we know, is the most godlike. The spiritual nature of man can not be released to enter into its full truth until he finds the word, *soul,* to limn it.

First the word, then the thought, and, flowering therefrom, the deed: by that trinity man mounts to his ultimate destiny. True, specialists still debate whether the thought precedes the word, or the word the thought. But for practical purposes it is enough to state it as it is here. And common-sense will serve to show the difficulty of thinking any thought unembodied in the words that convey it.

There is thus no greater power known to man than this of the word. Even in an age like ours that worships machinery and glibly speaks of TNT or other high-powered explosives, the quiet, insistent, ever-present and all-triumphant might of a word, first spoken, then, in later time, written down for transmission through the generations, must impress every thoughtful mind. It may lack the noise of guns, but in efficacy, in efficiency, in the irresistible carrying on, its silent strength makes mere noise seem but an external toy of the moment. There is something solemn and awe-inspiring about this instrument which, after the Promethean fire had

given man his original impulse toward the arts of civilization, followed hard on, to lead him up the slopes of time to a still higher place of vantage, whence through spokesmen called seers, philosophers, sages, poets and historians, he might differentiate himself from all these less lucky forms of life. The winged word flew higher than ever has the airman since, and so long before that the beginning of the flight is lost in the time mist, only here and there briefly revealed as we dig down to buried cities, and strive to read ancient inscriptions.

With such a record, and such an opportunity, the word has a sacred duty to perform toward mankind. But man, creator of the word, has also his correspondent duty: the duty to use the word aright, to penetrate into the heart of its meanings and to conserve its well-nigh divine potentiality. To abuse the power, to lower the flight, to debase the image and the superscription which declares that by the word alone may we become what it is intended we should be, that is sacrilege, no less; and no man can do better for himself or the race than to make his personal contribution to that great body of language in which and through which humanity has registered its progress and confessed its agonies. There can be no *Imitation of Christ,* without some Thomas à Kempis who, for himself, has thought Christ's

thoughts, and as truly, by the compulsion of his thinking, become familiar with words right and necessary to make concrete those high imaginings.

Words are indeed the golden way to the temple of truth, and if they are not always to be found in the street that is called straight, or if too often that golden way is a Via Dolorosa, it only signifies that, born of man, words must be part and parcel of his curious tangled Fate. The gift, like all gifts of the high gods, is for weal or woe, according to our will. In the presence of thoughts like these, we may approach the problems of language with a kind of quiver of responsibility, even upon the knees in prayer. Language study can be made dull and devitalizing,—alas, it mostly is!—but never when dealt with imaginatively, which is what the study calls for. To grasp its meaning, its full significance through the imagination, is to have an overwhelming sense of responsibility and privilege, to realize that a sort of magic is placed in our hands for the transporting of men beyond their present selves. Man, let it always be remembered, is both creator and conservator of language. Often the created thing becomes a tyrant, though at first the servant of thought; for countless human beings have suffered, even died, for a word: in philosophy, in debate over great issues, in religion, in war.

To create words is a task of genius. To conserve them is the joint business of us all: not of specialists alone, but of all who take an interest in sound speech, and possess the knowledge or the instinct to make it what it should be, treasuring what is, and only adding that which likewise is sound and sweet, right and happy. If we can not be creators of words, we certainly can be conservators of their manifold magic; being inheritors of their renown, we can pass on the inheritance to our heirs and assigns, having bettered the gift by enriching the original property. In a sense, it is descent by primogeniture, for only the few elder sons who are the choicest progeny of the family can really improve the tongue they speak. But also, looked at more deeply, it is descent by gavelkind, since every son of man who uses speech (as do we all) has his chance to preserve, if not to increase, what is given him. The speech user, content with slovenly uses, is untrue to his inheritance. And he who not only negatively fails to add to its value but actually indulges in uses that disintegrate and befoul the parental acres, is in very deed an unworthy son.

We speak of language in itself. Add to this thought the extra privilege of possessing English as our particular medium of expression and the privilege is emphasized, intensified. Surely it is well to

be born into the special form of power that comes from English words. The more special questions and aspects of English that follow in the successive chapters of this book, may be considered to advantage, having as a background this conception of the philosophic meaning of language, and more specifically of English as a lamp to guide our feet.

In the schools, far more than at the present obtains, our young people should be taught a sort of pride in possession, made aware of the special good fortune that is theirs in having been born into English through no effort of their own. Emphasis should be laid on the fact that there is no privilege without its commensurate obligation—that therefore it is one of their greatest duties as users of English speech to rejoice in its splendors, become familiar with its famed accomplishments, and increase their self-respect in the thought that it is their fair fortune to become participants in its benefits. One of the additional advantages of learning any tongue not English, quite aside from the merit of that tongue itself, lies in the quickened recognition of how virile and versatile the native speech is, when placed in comparison with another. We can admire the flavors of the foreign language, while gaining a new sense of the value of our own.

If this were commonly done, our young might

be less likely to groan over their grammatical exercises (and their groans were once ours) and might more often lift their heads, as a war horse at the sound of battle, when they hear some splendid strain of music, or some persuasive eloquence of oratory, or some cogent appeal to patriotism, all of them impossible save that they are made flesh through the weave and wonder of English words. Education would then, at least for a moment, no longer show a face awry, but a face mobile with the nobler emotions. There can be no dulling of interest, nor devitalization of feeling, when suddenly it dawns on the young recipient that these great speakers are his own, because they speak his language, however starry in their hands, and make use of the same symbols he has had handed into his possession, with the offer of the same blood-stirring chance, the same opportunity to impart grace and glory to the English way of expression.

CHAPTER II

THE GENIUS OF THE TONGUE

More than once the idea implied in the title of the present chapter will recur for reference or illustration. But it will be well, for purposes of fuller understanding, to consider it here somewhat more at length.

Every language in the world has its own peculiar way of saying things. It develops its own idiom. The word idiom means just that: one's own way. And the precious part of any tongue, that which keeps it independent and gives it individuality among all other languages, is this idiomatic manner of expression. As you study some other very idiomatic tongue, say the French, you soon discover that far more difficult than to acquire the French words themselves is the task of learning to put them together in the order necessary to produce the effect of true French, not French words set in the English order. The beginner's temptation is to get the mean-

ing of the French words and then string them together in a way to conform with the parallel English idiom. Hence the comic effects of many a foreigner in trying to learn a tongue not his own. Mark Twain has produced some of his best humorous effects in utilizing this familiar fact, as when he writes the Jumping Frog story in French or transcribes an English speech in literally imitative German. For this reason, idiom is full of pitfalls. I heard of a young American woman who, in studying literature at the Sorbonne, was asked by her French professor if she were married. Being in maiden state, she breezily responded, *"Pas beaucoup,"* meaning only to reproduce our American idiom, "not much." She was somewhat put out by the merriment which greeted her answer.

All great writers have an unusual endowment in their perception of the flavors of native idiom. They are great, among other reasons, because of this gift. It comes from education only in part, if at all,—though, of course, wide reading fructifies it. But such makers of literature have an instinct for the natural, happy, effective way of saying things in English. Often they lack scholastic training, but gain this sense of fine language by their self-directed reading (they know what they want, as the bee knows the flower that will yield her pollen); also,

they are aided by an inherited feeling for that which gives virtue and value to the English fashion of selecting and forming words, and weaving them into sentences. Bunyan was what is called an uneducated man, a tinker by trade, and his reading confined to the Authorized Version of the Bible. Yet he is one of the few great masters of true English idiom. It is said of Jack London that to the last his script had to be edited in the publisher's office, so full was it of elementary blunders. But the breath of life was in him. In short, such writers know (however the knowledge is acquired) the genius of the tongue as it comes to their hand; and through their use of it, that genius of the tongue is further enlarged and handed on to others. They are the creators and conservators of speech that is representative and hence destined to have wide influence and persist far beyond their day.

The genius of the tongue, in my phrase, might be called the backbone or structural organism of the language, whereas the incorporated elements from other sources are the flesh and blood,—that which clothes the skeleton to give it contour and color. English is a speech which in its long history has been subjected to much of this exterior influence and has assimilated the various other tongues it has had to swallow and digest. To go back to beginnings, this means that, starting with several Low German, or

Dutch, tribes, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who settled the country already inhabited by the Britons or Celts (who in their turn had been overcome by the Romans), England was forced to accept successively the inroads, and consequently the linguistic influence, of the Danes, and the Normans (who were Frenchified northmen or Scandinavians). Later, she was also compelled to receive a mighty inflow of Latin and Greek words because of the Renaissance culture, to say nothing of a continual scattering from still other tongues, Oriental or otherwise, the result of the wide contacts from trade and culture, along with the tongue's natural power of assimilation.

Even from this compact statement, a mere hint of the whole story, it will become apparent that English is not a pure tongue, but a highly composite one. However, the important thing to bear in mind is, that through all these disparate, conflicting linguistic adventures, the English backbone has not been broken, or gone bent, but English idiom, its own way of saying things, has persisted; with whatever variations, idiom has been idiom, and English speech managed to remain one of the most distinctive of modern languages, down to the present year of grace. Many storms have smitten the historic ship, but the ship has weathered them and continued its course on an even keel. So that anybody, who tries,

so to say, to get frisky with the speech and slip in some unidiomatic word or phrase or turn of expression, does it at his own risk, and is likely to be dubbed a foreigner, or worse, a bad writer. Henry James sometimes, great writer as he was, turned out sentences that one has to declare not English, but Jamesisms, laying him open to the wag's assertion that he had the James-jams. His life-long friend, W. D. Howells, points out in a letter to what extent James was affected by his early French residence: "Sometimes he wrote English that the editor easily convicted of Gallicism; but this was the helplessness of early use and habit from his life and school in France throughout boyhood." Or for a much later example, one that happens to be current while this is written, Susan Glaspell in her strong novel, *Brook Evans,* certainly writes excellent idiom in general. But she also perpetrates such an enormity as the following: "Brook's arms went as to reach out now," which is not English at all, but the vagary of a modern author, to be deplored and sternly rejected. No writer is eminent enough to be allowed these acrobatic gyrations. Ford Madox Ford is another writer in our day who permits himself such vicious indulgences, and his style suffers accordingly.

Now, if there is anything true in this crisscross world, it is that, strictly speaking, idiom can not be

taught: it can only be unconsciously absorbed, taken in through the pores. Grammar, on the contrary, can be, which is the difference between grammar and idiom. Obviously, I do not mean that one may not study idiom in the sense of noticing the myriad ways it has of expressing thought, and its habit of *not* expressing it in some other way. What is meant is, that there exists no set of rules by learning which one may acquire idiom. The rule that an English sentence has a subject and predicate can be consciously received and stored away for future reference: that is grammar. But why one way of saying a thing is idiomatic where another way is not, can not be learned in that fashion: it must be felt; it is a matter of intuition and instinct, assisted, however, by culture. Grammar can be taught and so can rhetoric (witness the number of books on those subjects); but the book is yet to be written wherein you can find out how to acquire a great style. As well try to teach how to become a great man. No, at bottom, instinct and intuition (though confessedly aided by a wise and generous reading habit) explain the right handling of words, however much an analysis afterward may show why these idiomatic effects are produced.

The question therefore boils down to this query: "How may one best get a feeling for English idiom,

so that its felicities and triumphs may be recognized and appreciated when they are met; and if we essay to write ourselves, how may we naturally choose the truly English fashion of expressing what is in our minds?" There is but one satisfactory way: by listening to and reading the best English (pay me the compliment to observe what is said in the chapter entitled "The Best English"). The quest divides into two parts, and we may first ask ourselves where we may hear the best idiom. Surely, in the language spoken easily, off-guard, in the homely relations of life, by people who have in their blood an inherited predilection for forceful, elegant and happy speech; also by noting the language of leaders of the pulpit, the forensic platform—often now received over the radio so that the handicap of distance is removed—and of the stage. The clear-cut, cultured intonations of the best actors, especially those of the older generations still surviving, are often fine models, and boarding-schools in or near New York who herd their students to hear Hampden, or Arliss, or Skinner in a Shakespearian play, are giving them, among other things, a valuable practical lesson in diction. The Germans are so convinced of the value of the theater in inculcating good idiom and its right enunciation, that they have a word, *bühne-sprach* (stage speech), to express its importance.

In all these contacts with good English on the spoken side, it should be borne in mind that the most natural and powerful of all ways of learning anything is through imitation. And in this process of assimilating the best idiom, I would emphasize what is inborn in a person, giving such a language user a splendid running start in the acquiring of an instinct for good English to be got from the opportunities offered by education and the countless contacts of social experience. One meets folk who seem to possess a natural flair for the felicities of speech: it can not be traced entirely to environment or explained by social contacts, however helpful and valuable they may chance to have been. Rather, it is something derived, *ab ovo,* from the mother womb; or better, a predisposition toward happy speech which, could we trace all the links of family evolution in this person's case, might be made plainer to us. But it is a gift, and fortunate that mortal upon whom it is bestowed. It is worth more than all that education can do. And it often appears in the most unexpected quarters: a bootblack startles with his racy and original metaphors; a longshoreman turns out to be a poet whose ardent adjectives inflame our imaginations with delight; and the son of a cobbler writes dramatic dialogue that reminds us of the Elizabethans. Shakespeare himself, supreme lord of language,

had but a limited rustic training; to this day, we are wondering whence he got that unexampled command of English expression. Such examples of the lily growing out of the mud are too common to excite the astonishment they deserve.

But this emphasis upon the inherited power of speech, that seems so God-given, is not to undervalue what can be done through the channels of formal education and culture, and by that more informal, but intensely influential, education gained by all the innumerable contacts and exchanges of life—merely glanced at here. To move in the best society,—using "best" as applied to persons of birth, breeding, education, culture, persons also of character and accomplishment, and all this resulting in social position,—is steadily to be trained in sound idiom, and the effect upon any one so lucky as habitually to be exposed to such an atmosphere is as sure as would be exposure to a contagion in the physical realm. Indeed, George Eliot speaks somewhere of "the slow contagion of good." In such associations, the genius of the tongue will be on parade. And curiously, by a striking paradox, it will also often be manifest in the mouth of simple folk far from these polite circles and cenacles of culture; speech of the countryside, spoken by people close to the soil, yeomen, farmers, folk of the trades and the

crafts, whom we would call uneducated persons, yet using an idiom with a tang to it, a reality born of concrete natural things, an idiom also preserving many of the older savors of the speech and slow to take up with the changeful cheap jargon of the cities. Country speech at its best is nobly a conservator of idiom of present value that yet has a backward look. City folk, used to the elegance of drawing-rooms and polite assemblies, make a woeful mistake if they do not listen, when opportunity offers, with both ears to hear such plain, forthright handlers of the tongue, who, untutored though they may be, are of main service in keeping alive the genius of the native speech. It might be declared, as a generalization, that corruption of language always comes from the town, never from the country. I am aware the statement may seem eccentric to some, but all philologists will bear it out.

The second way to bring about familiarity with the best idiom which expresses the genius of the tongue, is, of course, to read the standard authors, widely, genially and at one's own sweet will, roaming far afield, having favorites (chosen independently on the basis of real preference, with scant attention paid to what it is a duty to place first), letting personal predilection play freely a prominent part, personal prejudice even, since any reader of literature has

private pets, whether justified by the world's judgment or not. The truly major authors are fairly well settled; there they are, take them or leave them: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare and others of the immortal few. It were foolish to deny it, or in a spirit of unenlightened rebellion to refuse to have commerce with them. Any personal variation of a long-established opinion will not disturb their rating. Nevertheless, there are hundreds of sound writers, with a more than respectable place in the list of literary worthies, albeit not quite on a level with the lonesome giants, in whom it is our right to have legitimate enjoyment, and whose writings, moreover, contribute definitely to English idiom, and thus make good safe companions for us as we try to become sensitive and responsive to good English. To spend one's days and nights with such is gradually but surely to set up a touchstone by which merit and quality may be tested. In this way, among others, let acquaintance be made with speech that is consonant with the genius of the tongue. It is no hardship but one of the purest, highest, most fruitful pleasures that can come to any normal human being.

For a last word, let it be said again that, while we read, note, digest and enjoy the mighty masters

of English expression, and so come to recognize the idiomatic principles that make their speech precious, it is almost as important to be receptive to what lies outside of books; to pay attention to the sophisticated, often exquisite language of the town, of society in its choicest places, and also, even more rather than less, to keep in touch with the naïve folk-ways of speech as they are illustrated among the unlettered people, who, all unbeknown to themselves, retain so much of the vital flavors that make words potent instruments of exchange, contact and illumination. By such means and methods one desirous of attaining to a perception of English idiom in all those specimens which illustrate the language at its best and exemplify what has here been called the genius of the tongue, may accomplish his aim—at least, as far as it can be accomplished outside the inherited instincts for language I have dilated on, the inherited instincts that lie beyond all personal efforts. As we have seen, English spoken and English written can both be utilized to produce that coveted result. And once that result *is* secured, any human being, independent of the schools and under the disadvantage of no inherited aptitude for language, can acquire some perception of the marvelous expressional gamut speech can run, as it leaps carelessly along the levels

of practical demands, wrestles with the dangers always lurking in its path, or soars to those heights from the airy demesnes of which the serene masters of speech flute their messages and lift our eager souls in delight over their perfect utterance.

CHAPTER III

WHAT USE GRAMMAR?

It is pathetic, even appalling, to reflect on the number of schoolboys who have plaintively asked, "What use grammar?" Grammar is to them merely a necessary evil, and playing hooky from school to escape it has the lineaments of a virtue. It might be added, with small departure from the truth, that the majority of the human race are children also when it comes to the painful business of nouns and verbs, parsings and conjugations, and the rest of it. Most people, for all practical purposes, feel quite capable of conversation or the compulsory communications between their fellows without any need for the tortuous analytic processes with words to which we give that familiar and so often hated name, grammar.

Yet such a position is not entirely fair to the subject, for various reasons, some of which it will be the business of this chapter to indicate and discuss.

In the first place, it is idle to ask, "Why grammar?"—for the good and sufficient reason that as long as people talk and write and make literature, grammar will be involved. Which is to say, in talking and writing, certain principles of word use and construction will always be present, willy-nilly, and sooner or later, generally later, certain people called grammarians will inevitably study these ways of speaking, to discover why people talk as they do and afterward set it down in writing. They will then give their findings to the world—and, lo, we shall get Grammars with all the woes implied!

And for a next inevitable step, as long as we strive to frame such a combination of studies commonly called a curriculum in pedagogic parlance, those responsible for the educational system will be likely to place grammar as one of the necessary phases of human learning, vitally related as it is to the whole business of the use of English—whether for purposes of profit or pleasure, practical exchange of thought, means of utilitarian communication, or vehicle for the imparting of esthetic delight in all the varieties of literary art.

Even this brief analysis will serve to show that the thing called grammar, and so handsomely cursed by the schoolboys of all nations since civilization began, is not to be easily and lightly dismissed.

Grammar itself is so inextricably mixed up with the social-intellectual processes, and apparently so much a condition of the exercise of the one medium by which or through which mankind can advance in his long attempt to subdue this globe to his uses and the furtherance of his welfare. The one medium, of course, is language.

But in order to bring the matter more sharply to a focus, before tamely accepting grammar as a necessity, however disagreeable, let us ask ourselves these additional questions: Conceding education of some sort to be an advantage, and the proper manipulation of the mother-tongue one of the tools in hand helpful in this evolutionary process, may not an individual make effective use of speech, and come into sufficient knowledge of all its uses and charms, without this early painful drill in school or college? Must it exist as anathema to all the thousands forced to go through with it—so often to look back upon it not only with disgust and thankfulness to escape its thraldom, but also with a definite conviction that it was quite waste time, not in any way needed for a subsequent application in the daily business of living, getting on and possible success? It is by no means foolish questioning, for one meets plenty of folk, well educated and successful, who seriously give answer: "Grammar never did *me* any good, and

I know plenty who never took it who are in the best sense educated, and whose control, use and usufruct of English are exactly as fluent and effective as with those who underwent, perforce and loathingly, that devilish drill."

I can certainly add to this so frequently heard declaration my own observation, which is that I have met, not seldom, men and women who in maturity frankly tell me they do not know to-day the difference between a verb and a noun, and do not understand what you mean if you refer to the accusative case, or to a subject and predicate. Yet as I listen to their speech, or learn their fine taste in literature, I find they do not appear to have lost at all the object of grammar study, since they can show the results, though never having had the training. One's faith in the necessity of grammar study and grammar knowledge is naturally somewhat shaken by such an exhibit. If one is out to defend grammar, this sends one to one's guns, for the enemy is alert and convincing in his attack.

Still further: I have frequently fallen in with educated persons, educated in the sense that they had ample school and college training, who nevertheless, under impulse, emotional stress, when quite off-guard and instinctive in their utterance, would make grammatical slips every time: "I come," for "I came," and

other like blunders. The explanation is always the same. They were trained to speak correct English by the conscious head-work of academic days. But also they heard in their youth, in their family life and early environment in general, the faulty speech of people who had not enjoyed the privilege of so-called higher education which was to be theirs. And, as a result, since emotion and instinct are stronger than any use of the brain, they relapsed, as I say, when the mentor of acquired knowledge was not on the job—or, as we are wont to put it nowadays, when their Unconscious ruled—into the slovenly speech that came before their schooling. Whenever you hear these breaks made by somebody known to you as "educated," you may be sure the reason is the one given here.

When a student at Johns Hopkins University, I heard a very learned and distinguished man, then Librarian at Harvard, give a talk before a hand-picked audience of professors and graduate students. To my astonishment, from which a generation later I have hardly recovered, he, not once but several times, made slips in his grammar one would not have expected from the average high-school pupil. Even now, I wonder if my ears betrayed me. But, no, for others present, like myself, made it a matter of instant, excited comment.

The situation would thus appear to be something like this: you can be taught grammar in your early schooldays, only to have it go back on you in some moment of test in later years. Or you can utterly neglect the grammatical training during the educational period, yet, if you have a cultivated background to grow up in, you can be trusted to speak correctly without a thought given to rules and lessoned principles. It seems to be like that, and so we come back to the query: "What use grammar?" with a vigor born of the facts submitted. What case can we make out for grammar, if any?

One point in grammar's favor can be made at once. Even if, as far as spoken English goes, grammatical drill is not necessary for those of cultured environment; and if those who lack it, when trained later into correctness, lapse into early mistakes imbibed because their surroundings permitted such errors, yet when it comes to written speech those who might so lapse in conversation can apply principles learned in the schoolroom and make their speech correct. They can be trusted on paper, if not by word of mouth. In the rapid exchange of oral communication, they might say *don't* for *doesn't, come* for *came, you was* for *you were;* writing, they can safely be trusted to avoid such errors. Grammar study has done that much for them

Nor is this quite all to be said in justifying our poor down-trodden friend, grammar. Much of the odium attached to it in the way it is commonly taught in the *lehr-jahre*, or schooldays, is due to the unquestionable fact that a study that could be made vital, and even fascinating in the right hands, becomes terribly dry and repellent because the teachers themselves are dry-as-dusts. They strip English of its flesh, its contour and color, reducing it to the bare bones of philology, an abstract and difficult science only interesting to specialists.

The English language is a human instrument after all, alive because man who made and uses it is alive. This simple truth can never be asserted too often. And language, when we look beneath its linguistic surface, is full of the romance, poetry, tragedy and comedy that pertains to life itself. Elsewhere, I have somewhat more at length treated of the romance inherent in the fate of words. Words are like men in their sensational fortunes and misfortunes, their unbelievably different rôles, their multicolored fates. To make them a matter of umlaut and antepenultimate only, is a sin committed by those who have had authority in the premises and have emphasized the skeleton at the expense of the body clothed with the fair flesh and hue of life. Part at least of the distaste of grammer, wide-

spread and constant, lies right here. A great philologist, or language expert, like Wilhelm Grimm, for instance, can illuminate the subject so that it is almost as attractive as one of his brother's fairy-tales. But alas, men like the Grimms come but once a century.

One other defense of grammar as more than a necessary (or unnecessary) evil may be set up. Every civilized nation is an articulate nation. That is, history can show no people in their social evolution who, as a part of their achievement, have not the legacy of their culture in stone inscription, on papyrus, on vellum, or on the printed page. We learn of their artistic performance through this artistry of words, their creation of what is commonly called Letters. No exception to the statement can be found. Literature is one of the arts, and by their art products are races awarded their position in the archives of civilization. And this particular literate art, the art of expression in words, stands high, and always has, among the arts. It registers the thought, the philosophy, as well as the instinct for beauty, of any people who use the language. And since, properly viewed, grammar is, as we have seen, only the formulation of the laws that govern speech, to say such laws need not be studied and written down, being of no use or interest to the race using the

language, is almost tantamount to asking such race to commit suicide. It would be to deny significance and importance to that vehicle of expression through which alone the triumphs of literary art can be achieved. It would resemble in ancient times the repudiation of the old family gods, leaving no flame to leap upon the ancestral altar, the home hearth unswept, no sacrifices to the tutelary deities.

Literature, at first and in its earlier stages, can be conceived of as impulsive and unself-conscious. But in time—and this surely applies to our day—it becomes self-conscious, and the medium of expression, language, also must be consciously studied. Such study we dub grammar—let it be repeated, the formulation of the laws governing speech use.

As part of the culture of the young it should be taught in any nation that, culturally speaking, is still a going concern. The whole question centers in the matter *how* it is taught, and whether it can be done so as not to produce the acute nausea now associated with it. Let it never be forgotten that speaking is one of the arts, however much we lose sight of the truth. To give up an aid to that art, namely grammar, is to abandon the national claim to be artistic, so far as the analytic aspect of the art is concerned. And it is the contention here that the art of speaking, as expressed by grammar, and

the art of writing, as expressed by rhetoric, need not be a bore if only creative persons, with human sympathy as well as with learning, will write the grammars and the rhetorics. Nothing is deader than a live subject in dead hands!

Not children only, but we grown-ups as well, need to know that while intuitive good speech is possible, as explained, and in general in all the arts intuitive, spontaneous pleasure in art products is also possible; yet it is a grave error to assume that self-conscious analysis of the art product in order to ascertain qualities of merit through self-conscious criticism, is in any way a diminution of the instinctive response to beauty. On the contrary, it adds to appreciation by a sort of superimposed pleasure born of knowledge of the difficulties overcome by the artist. To watch him as he leaps hurdles, dodges dangers and triumphantly arrives at the artistic goal, is a joy to the onlooker trained to an awareness of his artistic skill. It is a joy over and above the satisfaction derived from the human values and the intellectual and spiritual values of this work. One may read, for example, a brief lyric and respond to its fine thought, happy phrasing and musical movement. But if one happens to know, in addition, that the lyric in question is a sonnet, one of the most intricate and definite of all English

art forms in verse, then the pleasure of accomplishment on the poet's part is surely doubled as one observes his use of the iambic pentameter, his obeying of the rhyme arrangement, and his division of the treatment into the octave and sextette, the sonnet's two parts.

And the argument applies as truly to language, its artistic handling and the recognition of the laws governing such handling as set down in grammar. A person may get along well, if culture is in his background, with speech uses for both practical and more literary purposes. But the added knowledge coming from the proper training in grammar may nevertheless prove of great utility in many a crisis of communication or crux of argument.

The reason, then, that grammar has been regarded as an evil is that it has been taught as an abstraction, a science, not an art: an art expressed in the interweaving of words, with the object to produce civilized, effective speech. The object has been slighted, obscured, and the aorist and umlaut made ends in themselves, which is all wrong. Give words as we study them the vital vibration which shows them as symbols of human thought and emotion. Thus regarded, even grammar, now on the esthetic *index expurgatorius*, may take on a meaning and an interest little dreamed of by schoolboys, or

by mature specialists who love to make them write paradigms on the board. At present, let it be confessed, the query, "What use grammar?" is hard to answer. But the way out to daylight, yes, even to *delight* is, to an eye capable of vision, clearly indicated. It would be a wonderful day indeed that saw that transition from dark to light. A large fraction of the human race would sing hosannas as they emerged from the woods into the sunlight of that emancipation.

CHAPTER IV

IDIOM AND GRAMMAR: A SEEMING QUARREL

FEW things provoke more discussion among human beings than matters of speech. We all feel we have a right to an opinion, and often the arguments become heated and even lead to violence. The usual way of settling such differences is by an appeal to a dictionary—if one happens to be handy. And when it is a matter of use, custom, or good usage, as it is called, grammar appears to be the court of appeal. If popular use, commonly called the idiom, conflicts with grammar, idiom, meaning the way people really *do* talk, is believed to settle it. An example or so will serve to bring this out clearly. In his fine poem, *The Recessional,* surely one of the most notable religious poems of our time, Rudyard Kipling has this line:

"The tumult and the shouting dies."

One who goes strictly by grammar, rubs his eyes,

takes another look at it and then corrects the language of a major poet, thus:

"The tumult and the shouting die,"

because, obviously, the way Kipling wrote it violates one of the best known of grammatical laws, namely, two subjects take a plural verb. Why, then, did the poet thus dare to use a singular verb after his two nouns, *tumult* and *shouting?*

The answer is, Kipling thought of the-tumult-and-the-shouting (I write it with the hyphens to show what I mean) as a mental unit, and so, having made the two words into one as to meaning, he used a singular verb for the one concept of *noise.* He preferred the thought-unit to a mere verbal-unit, as we may put it. He made a formal rule of grammar subservient to a real operation of the mind, because there can be no question that the mind draws together these two nouns, *tumult* and *shouting,* into a single concept.

An examination of our best writers, past and present, will show that this mental law overriding a verbal one is acted upon by innumerable makers of literature with the feel of style in their blood. The King James Version of the Scriptures, and it is commonly agreed that we have no finer idiom in English

than this of the Bible, again and again exhibits this tendency apparently to set aside the strict "two subjects take a plural verb" principle; and does it for the reason just explained. For instance, in Job, that magnificent drama of the inner life, we read:

"With Him is strength and wisdom."

Two nouns, *strength* and *wisdom,* are preceded by a singular verb, *is,* it will be seen. Here, as before, the mind of the writer thinks of the two nouns as together forming a single conception, so that *strength*-and-*wisdom* becomes a unit in his feeling. But something else must be added: the sentence as it is printed in the Bible is as if its author had written, "With Him is strength and is wisdom." In other words, the verb *is* looks ahead to one noun, *strength,* and then a second *is* is thought of but omitted, to take care of the second noun, *wisdom.* One can easily see the mind process making that likely.

Or sometimes, instead of two words as subjects being involved, we get one word which therefore should take a singular verb, but find that the author has in mind the collective significance of this singular noun and so has attached a plural verb to it. As where he writes the *multitude know,* not *knows,* although it is evident that if we regard *multitude* as

singular the verb also should be singular. Again the preference for mental unity, in place of mere verbal unity, you see. One can hardly call either way of writing it wrong or right. If in the author's mind the multitude as made up of many units is dominant, then the plural verb form seems the better. If, on the contrary, the multitude is thought of as many individuals blended into a larger unity, then the singular verb appears to be more appropriate. It depends, observe, upon the writer's psychology, his slant of mind. And grammar is not accustomed to consider the subjective mental side of the question, but is usually concerned only with linguistic results. Hence, a clash is likely to follow. Our first examples, then, establish this fact: often, in English expression, a grammarian's rule seems to be violated or ignored for the sake of some higher principle, a principle justified by the construction of the human mind as it is bent on the task of revealing itself through words, that thoughts may be communicated and feeling stirred.

There is one very familiar homely little idiom about which the battle often rages, and the facts concerning which furnish one of the worst confusions anywhere to be found in the discussion of speech uses. I refer to "It's me." It bobs up, almost daily, in the public prints, and good folk everywhere are

greatly perturbed as to the right or wrong of it. Let us try to sketch the situation and see if some light can be thrown on an indubitably dark place in grammar. First, consider it from the grammatical view-point. We certainly, here in America, were taught that "It is I" was correct, "It's me," a vulgarism. Any one who had schooling knows that. Analysis would seem to show that the pronoun *I* in this sentence is a subject, in the nominative case, whereas "It's me" puts the subject in the objective case—or accusative, another word for the same thing. To say "Me is" sounds absurd, yet that is what you appear to be doing in saying, "It's me." Add to this the other fact (your observation teaches you so) that polite usage, meaning the use of trained, educated, cultured people wherever you go in this country, favors "It is I," and frowns upon "It's me,"—and the argument for "It is I" seems, to put it mildly, a very strong one.

But further investigation and broadening of our inquiry put in evidence some conflicting, puzzling additional facts. If we look across the water to the parent country, we find that the upper classes, by which I mean the educated folk and those of highest social standing, including the gentry and nobility, do not say, "It is I," when they wish to express that particular thought, but invariably say,

"It's me." You can verify this by watching the leading authors like Stevenson, Kipling, Galsworthy and others at the top, for they report the facts and make their characters, representing class rather than mass, invariably use the idiom that with us here in the United States is taboo. "It's me," emphatically, has come in England, come to stay, and has driven out what we are taught in school and college as correct. So here we are in a dilemma. The impulse is to declare that England is wrong, America right, and that there is no reason why we should not preserve what is the proper way of saying a thing, and let the British be slovenly if they so wish. Unfortunately this smacks somewhat of bat-eyed patriotism, and, in addition, overlooks certain arguments which seem to point to the eventual victory of "It's me." Let me explain.

The basic truth is that the older grammarians, whose authority was once supreme and whose influence is still at work though scholars now know better, were in bondage to Latin grammar and tried to foist the rules governing that language on English, an entirely different tongue. And it happens that "It is I" is not a truly English idiom, as can be easily proved. The first great translation into English of the Bible was printed in the late fourteenth century, contemporary with the first major English poet,

Chaucer. In that version, at the passage which describes Christ's injunction to Peter when he tries to walk on the water, the later edition, which we all know, reads: "It is I, be not afraid." But this earlier version, John Wyclif's, to name the translator, reads: "I am *it*. Fear not." Here you have positive proof that as late as Chaucer's time the idiom "It is I" was unknown to English.

Now for the modern application of a fact in English linguistic history which, rightly understood, sheds a deal of light. When a speech user to-day says, "It's me," such a person is simply responding to an instinct which roots in the past. English has for cousin the German tongue. To-day a German says *"Ich bin es."* It is not in the blood of one whose English is in sympathy with the genius of the tongue to say, "It is I." It is a response to such instinct to say, "It's me," thereby showing that the past is not forgotten. And therefore, no modern grammar reiterating the idiom, "It is I," will ever convert those who handle the tongue with vigor and felicity to acceptance of it as the best way of expressing that particular thought. The British have come round to this already. And, to indulge in prophecy, the English spoken in the United States, at present favoring "It is I," will at the end come to use "It's me." Nothing in the history of language is surer

to happen than that,—however unpleasant the assertion may now sound. This, of course, does not mean that one would do well, as a bit of pioneering, to go back to the original Germanic "I am it." English has long since split off from German and other allied Germanic tongues in this and hundreds of other idioms. But it *is* to assert that eventually, if not now, "It's me" will conquer "It is I." Give it a homely test. Imagine the man of the house returning from a dinner very late at night, and wishing to sneak into his domicile without waking his wife. If she, hearing, opened a window and asked, "Who's there?" is it likely that he would reply: "It is I?" No, with the desire to make himself small strong upon him, that man would abjectly whisper, "It's me." His humble state of mind (and morals) would best be represented by that lowlier manner of expression.

If you ask me: "Would you advocate the use of 'It's me' by teaching it in the schools?" my reply would be, "No, not yet." What I am trying to make plain is that when some user of English to-day does use that phrase, such person is not being wicked or slovenly, but is guided by a praiseworthy instinct to be true to the idiomatic values of the native tongue. That's all. It may be added that the exact parallel of the French *"C'est moi,"* where, like the English, a

dative case follows the verb, throws further light. It is quite likely that during the present generation the proper pedagogic attitude will frown upon this locution. But I trust I have made understandable why it will win out at last. Here is a type case where idiom seems to exercise an ancestral power over grammar. But at once we must ask, "What do we mean by grammar?"

Grammar, as noted before, properly is nothing but the formulation of the principles that govern idiom, or the way English expresses itself in contrast with all other tongues. Therefore, if grammar be true to this task, there can be no conflict between idiom and grammar. That ought to be as plain as a pikestaff. The mischief begins when grammar in the attempt to formulate the rules, laws and principles of speech, has not included in its survey the whole sweep of usage, not alone modern but *throughout the centuries of its development.* I use italics, because right here is the nub of the matter. Many grammars of the past and some of the present have not possessed this knowledge, and hence have gone wrong, and set up in opposition idiom and grammar itself, when the latter should be only a report of the former.

Add to this the fact that the farther back you go, the more English grammarians were under the bondage of Latin in passing judgment upon matters of

English usage, and you see how it was possible to beget confusion in this field. The science of philology, meaning a thorough knowledge of English in its unfolding through all the centuries during which literary monuments have been produced for our study and enlightenment, is a very young one. In the eighteenth century, for example, the principles of English use which had their origin in the Old English period, long before the Norman Conquest of the eleventh century, had not been studied and formulated. As a result, grammars based on such half-knowledge were untrustworthy. It is only within the present century that we have been getting grammars whose authors had under survey the full sweep of English linguistic history. It should be no matter of surprise, then, that the *English Grammar* of George R. Carpenter (to mention but one) should state the truth as it is not stated in earlier books. I recommend this book for examination, and especially its reference to the test case, "It's me."

Moral: trust no one but a philologist when it is a question of language. And see to it that nobody but trained philologists write our grammars. Any opinions offered aside from those of the scientist of speech is just genteel guessing, nothing more. This fact will penetrate to general consciousness only slowly; but penetrate it will eventually.

One thing more: never forget that idiom is the very life of language, its savor and charm, the blood in its veins, that which among the languages gives it distinction and value. Let it be said again here for the sake of emphasis. And what is considered correctness in the use of the tongue is secondary to that happy, instinctive selection and arrangement of words in consonance with the peculiar genius of the speech that happens to be your mother-tongue. Something deeper than mere rules and precepts lies beneath conformity, however desirable. The person who wins fame by his use of English is he who has in his Unconsciousness the greatest repository of fit and felicitous expression. And it hardly needs saying that to enrich that vocabulary and power of speech, the more contacts with the best spoken English and with our best writers, who really make literature, the better. All culture in English puts the speech user in a position to rise superior to the confines of conventionalized grammar and disport himself in the purer air of effective idiom.

CHAPTER V

ONCE RIGHT, NOW WRONG

THOSE who possess a genial knowledge of the earlier uses of English idiom, and are familiar with English in its historical development, are aware how astonishingly often a usage once of the best society has fallen into disrepute. When I hear an untutored person say, "He learned me that way," I hesitate to pity his mistake, knowing that for centuries of English use the verb *learn* was thus made to take the part now played by *teach,* which came later into the tongue, while *learn* was shifted to a passive use. The uneducated man, then, who uses *learn* in his now apparently ignorant and awkward way, is simply holding on to a use that was classic for a long while. It may be said in general that half the uses now taboo for what we call the best English were, if one goes far enough back in time, in the politest company of acceptable speech. It seems strange to-day, in view of our grammatical

knowledge, that the double negative is impossibly vulgar English, when it is perfectly true that this contradiction in the sense of what is meant, this locution that now heard on the lips of anybody at once stamps him as incurably ignorant and in the outer darkness from culture, can be found freely used in the King James Version of the Bible, in Shakespeare, and in later masters like Milton, Addison, Lamb. It comes down even to standard makers of literature like Stevenson, though by his time it is used cautiously and only sporadically, as a survival of a good old use.

How can it be, this mistake so long prolonged? It must be plain that when you say, "I don't know nothing about it," you have said in effect, "I know *something* about it," which obviously is exactly the opposite from what is meant. How then can such an absurdity arise, and persist in good speech so long, before being rectified in our more analytic days? The answer involves an important principle of all speech use and formation. If language were made on the self-conscious analytic plan, such an idiom as, "I don't know nothing about it" would never have come into existence. But not so is language made. It comes into being under the rapid, spontaneous necessity of immediate use, it has an emotional impulse behind it, it aims above all else

at rubbing in its meaning upon the ears of those who receive it. And one of the ways, it discovers, of thus impressing hearers, is to reiterate what is said; say it again and again, in order that the impression may linger, and sink in, and be remembered. A dictum of speech might be said to be, "Twice said is well said." To put it in a more scholastic way, then, the idiom which I am using as an illustration has an intensive force and purpose. The double negative, so-called, is really a way of expressing the thought with redoubled force, by saying it twice. It was so received, so used for generations, until grammarians and others began to perceive that on close examination *don't know nothing* was an equivalent to the reasoning faculty of knowing *something*. Then, presto, it became bad form to say it that way. It is a neat illustration of the truth that idiom came before grammar, and the creative act in language before any analytic process of the brain.

Always in the present usages of English idiom, there are innumerable instances of rustic speech habits, not in polite usage, unheard save in the smaller communities and remote from fashionable linguistic quarters, yet prodigally persistent and vital in the countryside, or perhaps kept alive by some trade or profession or local necessity of daily use. The usual attitude, naturally, toward all such

speech uses is one of amused tolerance, patronizing superiority, or actual frowning upon error. But the real joke is on those who patronize, for always more than half such rusticities and country ways of parlance are simply the best English of some earlier time, now fallen into disuse in the speech centers. It is a safe generalization to say that country speech is homely, where city speech, if of the lower order, is vulgar. That distinction between homely and vulgar is of great importance, and people often confuse the two.

I should say that the last word of culture in language use was to be found in the ability to distinguish instinctively between the homely (merely another word for the idiomatic) and the vulgar. Plenty of picturesque current idiom stands for the former, though the latter be prevalent. Sometimes the distinction is not so easy. Should we condemn the expression "Jones is very high hat, these days"? It certainly is lively, and as certainly clear in its implication; one would hesitate to call it low. In a grave, dignified or solemn setting doubtless it would be incongruous. But some of us might feel that it would be going too far to eliminate it as idiom of the day,—an impoverishment of English speech. Such a locution has the flicker of humor precious to the American view of things sublunary. Strip language of its

twinkle of fun, as embodied in current expression, and you put it in a box the destination of which is the graveyard. When it comes to a turn of words like "He is a go-getter," one may declare it has an unpleasantly commercial flavor, while at the same time doing justice to its terse descriptive value; which can be discovered by trying to offer a more literary substitute. Another idiom having to do with the verb *get,* heard in the phrase "I *get* you," in the sense of grasping a meaning, has a similar Anglo-Saxon smack to it, yet perhaps is a shade lower in the scale of acceptability, although why, it would be hard to say. Possibly because of overuse, rather than essential objectionableness. But surely it should be part of our sense of value in this delicate and dangerous field, to recognize at once that an idiom like "He made good" is based on sound inherited instinct, with centuries of established usage behind it. Numerous existing parallel formations could be cited. It would be an uppish attitude which turned up the nose at any such phrase as a mere solecism and an upstart.

Decisions like this offer a severe test, demand wide experience, the feel for value, and a grip on idiomatic principles. It may be said that the rules commonly applied are too timid, too full of negations, to be either authoritative or satisfactory. Not

seldom what seems like a brand-new coinage turns out to be an old use in a new dress.

Country speech, as we were saying, hangs on to older modes and forms of expression, tends to be archaic, and preserves many a good old use that has long since disappeared from English of the populous centers. This is the value of dialect and patois, which wrongly have been regarded as corruptions of polite uses, whereas they are in a pedigree of excellent showing, and, in fact, not seldom of better breeding than the *nouveau riche* in words quite below them in lineage.

One should always listen with open ears and a great deal of respect to the variants from the supposed-to-be best English, and observe whence the people come, in order to get the right sense of relative values. And it is certain that we shall be broader-minded in appraising speech uses, when once we have lodged in our understanding the truth that some phrase, turn of expression or word that may now strike us as inadmissible, once stood high among its fellow uses, and has come down in the world through the chances of Fate rather than through any fault of its own. Also, that old-fashioned people using such words or phrases are but clinging to the Past and not at all degenerating in their linguistic instincts. It is all a matter of

fashion, and fashion obtains in language exactly as it does in a woman's garb. When the small-town woman while shopping in a big city speaks to the clerk of "boughten goods," the clerk probably smiles an urban smile as in the presence of one from rural regions. Yet the country woman is only clinging to a perfectly good and proper usage. A glance at the verb *buy* will prove it. Evidently, *buy, bought, boughten* are its three parts, so that when our friend from the small town says *boughten,* she is saying the equivalent of *purchased,* and making use of a participle which should be in good and regular standing, but which happens to have fallen into desuetude. The clerk in his ignorance thinks he is listening to a bucolic lapse. He is really listening to the conservative retention of a good old use,—just that.

The farmer who pushes his chair back from the table after a meal, and declares he has "et hearty," certainly seems to be talking the vulgar speech of his isolation. Yet here again he is but retaining older usages of polite society. His *"et"* is only an attempt to continue the elder *eat,* which is the right past tense, the original verb being *etan,* whereas our modern *ate* is not to be found if we go back as far as the eighteenth century. And *"hearty"* for the adverb *heartily,* which is the way we polite people

to-day would say it, is a reminder that there was an earlier time in English when adverbs did not need the added *ly* to make the form; so that *hearty* indubitably would have done service in court circles. A little light from the past will show plainly enough how much alleged error in current speech is nothing but an archaic survival of the best usage; and that the simple folk who live outside the cultivated speech centers are really, as likely as not, the repositories of much that was in choice usage in bygone days.

And this rule of right once, wrong now, be it noted, works both ways. It is also true that what was once wrong is now right, because of the persistence with which the best users of English have clung on to some uses which at first were in the hands of the vulgar and ignorant. For instance, it is apparent that the verb *hang* has for past tense *hung*. Therefore, "he shall be hung by the neck until he is dead," can be seen to be good English, as indeed it long exclusively was. But to-day, in lawyer lingo, the classic phrase reads, "He shall be *hanged* by the neck"—which means that, by mistake, *hang* has been associated with the so-called weak verbs, and, as a result, *hung* becomes *hanged*. And you find this wrong use (wrong, in the strict grammatical sense) in the Bible, our best diction, and also common with

the authoritative writers of English. A grammatical mistake, then, sanctioned by repeated usage of the finest authors. To-day, we may use either *hung* or *hanged*, according to the color desired in our style.

Another instance. Everybody would agree that the phrase "anybody else's" is good English. It is an idiom firmly fixed in our use. Yet in analysis, it will not hold water. Consider a moment. We can best see the point by supplying the omitted noun in this locution: "anybody else's hat." What we really mean is, anybody's hat *else*, and that is the way, if we would be logical, to write it. But our idiom overlooks that fact, and places *hat* after the *else*, though a second's thought shows you that it isn't *else's* hat (which is nonsense), but *anybody's* hat we mean. In the accepted idiom the possessive sign is quite misplaced. Nevertheless, "anybody else's" has come to stay, and a wrong has become a right. To say, "anybody's else" would sound priggish in the extreme. Let these two examples suffice for a myriad more that might be cited.

During this discussion, I have steadily used *right* and *wrong* to characterize questions of usage. For practical purposes, this is well enough, and people at large like to use these words, and feel safe in their decisions by so doing. But the trained philologian

knows well that it would be nearer the truth more often, perhaps in the majority of instances, if we used *better* or *worse*. Thousands of moot-points, where we ask, "Shall we do this or that?" can be best settled by saying, "You can do either, but this is better than the other." In matters of pronunciation, this is especially so. What, for example, are you going to do when all your life you hear the word *evolution* spoken with the dull sound on the first syllable, as in *every;* and then, suddenly, you hear some British scientist say it with the long *e* sound, exactly like the value given it in *evil*. If you are commonsensible, you are going to say that, being an American, you propose to stick to the pronunciation which matches the *e* sound in *every*, and not in this case imitate the British pronunciation, since cultivated speakers in the United States do so pronounce the word, and any good American dictionary will back you up in that decision. Moreover, there is good historical background for it, as well. This conflict between our native use and that of the British, a very common thing, leads by natural transition into the next chapter.

CHAPTER VI

BRITISH OR AMERICAN ENGLISH?

THE tourist who returns from England (his name is legion), saying *lift* instead of *elevator,* and *luggage* for *baggage,* does so under the impression that it is better English. At least, one presumes so. The fact raises a not uninteresting question: if we think of the English-speaking lands, is London the standard for everybody, including Americans? Or, can these United States set up their own model of speech; and if so, what locality, section or city may be looked to as establishing the law, if not the prophets? Really, there is a vast deal of confusion on the subject, and any attempt to clear it up would seem justifiable.

A certain fact at once confronts us. It is a law of language, and the history of all the languages used by the peoples of the earth illustrates it: that when two sections of those speaking the one tongue, separate and settle in some other part of the

world, a divergence of speech begins and increases according to the distance and the time of separation. The Romance tongues as they are called, that is, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, were once unified in the Roman speech. That they differ from Latin to-day, and decidedly from each other, is due only to their different habitats, plus the many centuries lying between the Latin spoken in Rome and the present period.

In the case of America, our forefathers were of English stock and came here to found the United States just a little over three hundred years ago. Linguistically, it is not so long, still, three centuries is quite a time for people using English as their native language to speak it detached by some three thousand miles of salt water from the parent speech. It is not surprising, therefore, that, already and increasingly, the American idiom is not exactly that of London, or of the many variations from its speech heard in the various counties of the motherland. When you throw in with word choice and arrangement, the modulations, intonations and expressive speech-tunes of both peoples, English and American, it results that sometimes the two have some difficulty in understanding each other, though it does not prevent them from getting along well enough in all practical exchanges of speech. And

indeed, when trouble does occur, it is far more from the way British speech strikes the American ear (and vice versa), than from a failure to understand the words themselves. But inevitably, naturally, idioms indigenous to the respective countries arise and flourish, and the story of English in its three homes, as the historian Freeman once put it, well illustrates what always happens, as I said, whenever the same speech in origin is ruptured in this fashion by time and space.

So definitely has our speech in the United States differentiated itself from the English spoken in England, that Mr. H. L. Mencken ventures to write a large book on American English, claiming that we now possess a language of our own as distinguished from the parent source. It is a piquant theme and he makes much of it, with a great deal to back his opinion.

The question then may be stated in this way: have we departed far enough from the English of the motherland, and sufficiently developed in an independent use of English to put in a claim to be another speech, just as French, for instance, is a speech independent of Italian, though deriving from the same source? And, closely connected with that decision, have we a right as Americans to prefer our own words and idioms, valiantly saying the "end of

the street" for the British, the "top of the road"—and thus with hundreds of other variants?

Let it frankly be confessed at the start that plenty of students and scholars (led, naturally enough by the British) take the position that we are only a variant from the parent speech, and that when it comes to authority, and a search for the best, we must infallibly choose the English of the British Isles in preference to the English spoken, in all its varieties, up and down the States. The late Barrett Wendell of Harvard, went so far as to argue that even our American literature,—which means Emerson and Thoreau, Lowell, Longfellow and Holmes, Poe, Hawthorne and Whitman, to say nothing about Ring Lardner and Theodore Dreiser and John Erskine,—was but a department of British Letters and in his judgment a minor part, at that. This view won for him the name of an Anglomaniac, but it is ably defended in his book on American Literature. Gradually, however, American critics are plucking up courage and more and more asserting in no uncertain terms that we have a language of our own over here, and should nurse our idioms, and encourage our writers to write Americanese, to call it that, rather than tamely conform to British usages. Brander Matthews earlier, as well as Mencken later, has been an exponent of this view.

The whole discussion takes on sharp outlines, and assumes considerable practical importance when we apply it to ourselves personally, and seek to decide whether we shall stick to our own speech, and, to repeat our illustration, while we are touring England say *lift* instead of *elevator* for convenience's sake and better understanding in getting about, yet retain our own way of talking in our own country, without any sense of deterioration. May we do so, though aiming at a sound, correct manner of speech? That brings the whole matter to a pointed application, and surely must be answered unless we are willing carelessly to drift with the tide and let expediency alone be our guide; or worse, unless we wish to ape English custom, without having at all reasoned it out, not being able to give a rational excuse for our action and decision.

I believe two principles should be clearly held in mind in aiding that decision. It is right to use our own expression, natural, inevitable, whenever and wherever such use arises from the American conditions, and fits our life as it is lived, while we create language, or continue to take advantage of the inherited speech, subject to all the changes, new needs and necessary additions of a people of well over a hundred million population. As we have said, a new locale creates new idiom, always: that is history.

Moreover, in the assimilation of so many foreign elements, on a scale never before seen on earth, English thus evolved will and must differ from that of England, or of any of its outlying dependencies. The statement is fortified by listening to what has happened in principalities like Canada and Australia. By no means has the English of London been preserved intact in those lands. The same, or similar, departures to be noted in the United States occur there as well. The law works wherever applied. American idiom is idiom evolved under new conditions, and, whatever scholars may legislate, it will go on being made, to the end of ends.

Less humility is demanded of us in consideration of the fact that as often as not alleged Americanisms on examination turn out to be good old English uses abandoned by the British but preserved by us. One illustration may suffice. The word *guess* is constantly pointed to, not seldom with scorn, by our British relatives, as a specimen of a sort of Yankee dialect that, to our shame be it said, has been universally adopted in this country. Yet any scholar of the elder English knows that it was for generations the best idiom in polite and literary parlance, and that the first great English poet, Chaucer, uses it as freely as any man who hails from Maine. It is simply a word retained by us, dropped by the British.

Its pedigree is unassailable. Doubtless it is confused in use with *think;* but where, as often, it means the hazard of an opinion, it is English so good that any trained user of speech in the United States should fight and bleed for its retention. It may sound homely, but it is not vulgar; a distinction that can not too often be insisted upon.

The second point is this: in defending our creation in the United States of new words and idioms to meet the new circumstances that come up, we are not implying that speech use in this blessed land is a kind of go-as-you-please contest, governed by no general principle, and allowing all sorts of vulgarity, slipshod manipulation and banal twist of the noble instrument handed to us three hundred years ago by those who brought English from across the seas to be domesticated in this larger area. Far from it. The law, which I have been at pains to explain earlier in the treatment, is just as sternly at work here, as in England, or wherever else English speech has vital life. To that law all users of English, wherever found, must bow. I refer to the law of the genius of the tongue. Any Americanism is to be tested not by the question whether it departs from British use, for it legitimately does, again and again; but according to whether the word, or phrase, or locution of whatever kind conforms to that underlying instinct

of idiom which makes English what it is, and separates it from all other tongues used by human beings in the vast family of peoples on the earth's surface. If any American use violates this principle, it is bad and stands an excellent chance of being short-lived. If, on the other hand, any such handling of the mother speech carries on the genius of our tongue even if it be so new as to seem startling, and so odd as to make us catch our breath as we hear it, it must be supported by those aware of the history of English speech, and (a more difficult thing by far) also aware of and sensitive to all the delicate shadings, the nuances, the subtle variations and the shy inner meanings of which English is capable.

Of course, it is no easy matter clearly to perceive, and then be able to apply this principle of the genius of the tongue to a specific case. It takes training, culture, broad and sound knowledge, and much immersion in the finest English, both spoken and written. But scholars, who are also members of society, hearing speech widely, and quick to catch all its accents and possibilities, have it as part of their duty to prepare themselves for authoritative rulings on this matter. And the people, too, getting all the education they can, realizing that self-training through vocal and literary contacts with the best will be a leaven to leaven the lump of ignorance that is

crass, experience that is cramped, and that deadly thing half-knowledge, a greater danger than honest, confessed unawareness itself, may be counted on to do their share in getting the right view into recognition. Let it never be forgotten that many a person technically uneducated, but with a hang for reading good literature and an ear sensitive to the values of good speech will be in the way of creating happy idiom without knowing it and quite innocent of the grammatical why of what he does. Here we again remind ourselves that language is made on the run by instinct and emotion, not tortuously beaten out by the brain.

What then emerges from the discussion touching this matter of the relative demands of British and American usage, judged from the latter angle of approach? Something like the following, it would seem. There is no reason at all why an American should say *lift,* for example, in his own country, and doing so certainly smacks of affectation. He may without reproach use the British word while on his travels, as a matter of convenience. But on returning to his native soil, *elevator,* the accepted substitute, is good enough for him or anybody else.

Truly pitiful is the Anglomaniac who, coming back from a brief sojourn in the British Isles, is heard talking about something being "different to"

something else. This pseudo-idiom has crept into modern British use, and nothing one can name is worse, or less admissible. When Thackeray was lecturing in this country, in the eighteen-fifties, he challenged Lowell to point out any anachronism in *Henry Esmond,* and the American, to the other's discomfiture, drew attention to this locution, "different to" in a novel of the eighteenth century, the point being that no such use then existed—a fact overlooked by Thackeray. In other words, "different to" is a modern innovation, and a very bad one.

In the legitimate idiom, "different from," the disjunctive idea implicit in the Latin *dis* is carried out, properly, by the English preposition *from.* But the separating *dis,* added to the English *to,* is in the nature of a contradiction in terms—obviously. Thus, by analysis, "different to" is as objectionable as it should be, anyway, to a sensitive ear. It is a bastard variant foisted on the good old form, "different from," and any American who seizes on it for reproduction is not only imitating the British, which sometimes may be defended when some use of theirs is admirable, but is imitating a bad thing. Linguistic snobbery can go no further. On the contrary, to adopt some British locution, not because it is British, but because it is better in every way than his own word, does not necessarily savor

of Anglomania, but may be plain common sense. The intention is all, and one can generally tell when some inhabitant of the United States is merely aping an imported fashion or custom. But, as a generalization, we may say that when any American use is sound in origin, expresses something that belongs to our development, and is in consonance with the genius of the tongue, as explained, we should sturdily stick to it, without fear or favor. The best English for an American is the English spoken by the best people here, not oversea. We have accomplished long since our political and religious freedom, and it is high time we likewise established our social liberty as exhibited in using the English inherited in a way to mirror our needs, aptitudes, actual growth and present status. This does not mean (let the warning be inserted) that we are not to listen in at any and all manifestations of speech as prosecuted by our English kinsmen. And if some use obviously, and by the scholar test, is superior to our own, it will be the part of wisdom not only to listen but to incorporate it in our speech ways. Independence, however, the spirit embodied in Independence Hall, is just as applicable to language as to politics and religion. The American language to-day is not, can not and should not be a mere replica of that heard beyond the Atlantic. Other needs, other words.

Very often, in the parallel uses of English and American, one idiom is used on this side of the water, another in England, both of them built on the true principles of native expression, so that it would be wrong to say that one is better than the other, in the abstract. An American, riding in a trolley car, might say to the conductor, "Please let me off at such-and-such a corner." The Britisher, wishing to express exactly the same thought, would say, "Put me down at such-and-such a corner." Both these, as coinages, are excellent; they respect the genius of the tongue; they are sound idiom. But if the American adopted the locution of the Britisher, he would properly be set down as a silly ass. Why do it? The American locution is in every respect as good as the other, and, moreover, it is ours. Therefore, stick to it.

But having plainly taken our stand in favor of an autochthonous handling of ideas in language over here, certain qualifications must be made, properly to round out the picture. Otherwise, the charge of jingoism might plausibly be made.

There is no doubt whatever that language as used in this country is subjected to very special attacks on its rightness and acceptability. In this respect, it has been forced to weather storms which have not smitten stay-at-homes on English soil.

Hordes of peoples representing all the European lands, to say nothing of the Orient, have swarmed in upon our hospitable shores, and will continue so to swarm, whatever may be the modifications of our immigration laws. The tongues spoken by these different nations have been brought here and used while the alien elements of the populations to whom they are native have been undergoing the process of the great melting-pot as it fiercely tries out all foreigners, to find if at the end they may have applied to them Zangwill's words, "God is making the American." Many of these people, in more or less isolated communities, keep up their own tongues, practise them daily, through the natural contacts of home, factory and church, and social intercourse. The younger generation, however, as a rule, prefer English, since in school and all other social contacts with their fellows, it is the preferred language, so that gradually they turn away from the speech of their parents. But in the process of their assimilation it is natural that countless words, constructions and turns of expression, intermingled with English by them even as they try their best to acquire that tongue, should make an assault upon the integrity of English itself. That is exactly what has happened, is happening; it is so obvious that the mere statement of it is an argument.

All over the United States one has only to harken and hear the strange, distorted bastard speech which is the result of this gigantic attempt at amalgamation. Pennsylvania Dutch, so-called, is but one of innumerable examples; "the cow has over the fence gejumpt"—that sort of thing. One day in Reading, Pennsylvania, I bought a newspaper to find a columnist conducting a humorous department in "Dutch" while some of the advertisements were also in that tongue. In various parts of the land, one can find the German influence strong, and German ways of talking therefore dominant. The Scandinavian element in the Northwest is remarkably to the fore. A walk of three or four blocks from the Club where I once lived in Minneapolis, brought me to a little park. Sitting there, I heard about me from the folk who thronged the place, Swedish and Norwegian talked as much, so it seemed, as if I were in Stockholm or Oslo. Opposite was a Swedish church, with notices in that language in front of the building. The look, as well as the speech of those all about me, was so distinctly Scandinavian that it gave me a strange sense of transportation to Europe. And, knowing that element of the population as I did from long contact, it was pleasant to feel that these people made an acceptable contribution to our citizenry. But

they were one, only one, local illustration of what is happening to the inherited English speech here in America under the pressure of its assimilation by the foreigners from all lands. In large cities like Chicago and New York, the Slavic folk similarly have their potent effect on speech. Yiddish, properly a German dialect with Hebrew modifications, is so common as to justify the answer of the man who, being asked if he could speak it, replied, "Oh, well enough to get around New York!"

It were silly idealism to assume that all these foreign influences up and down the land leave the English language where they found it. The tongue in this country is undergoing a more terrible attack upon its essential principles than anywhere else on earth, and probably a more destructive assault than any mortal tongue has been forced to receive in the world's history, considering extent of use and the numbers speaking it.

Half of our best-known, best-loved American humor consists in comic representations of the queer English heard all about, the way the unacclimated or half-acclimated people struggle with the English which has come to them from a source which once gave us the language of Shakespeare, Milton, Thackeray and Dickens, and Elia, Browning and Tennyson, Lamb and Stevenson,—these on mother-

soil; and on our own, Emerson and Hawthorne, Poe and Lowell and Longfellow, and half a hundred other authors who have been proud to conserve the finest in our speech use, and regarded themselves as repositories of a precious inheritance.

To ask that all this should produce no effect whatever upon the validity and value of English, is to ask for a miracle. The whole matter simmers down to this: will the deep-seated structural unity and solidity of the English tongue as carried on by that portion of language users who still are aware of its characteristics, be able to preserve it in the face of these rude onslaughts on all sides from the foreign elements in our population? It is a far-seeing and optimistic patriot who can unhesitatingly answer in the affirmative. One thing is certain: to stem the tide, to keep alive in the national consciousness the true significance and value of English as developed on American soil, a deeper and deeper culture in language, and the literature which is its storehouse, is imperative. Our popular public education can have no duty greater than this. And our many private institutions of learning in school, college and university, being freer to pay attention to the crying necessity of such preservation, have laid on them a very special obligation.

This does not mean that a welcoming hand

should not be extended to legitimate variations, piquant additions and resourceful new creations of the English linguistic word hoard introduced into American speech. Not at all. Many of our inventions are happy, useful, truly creative. But it does mean, emphatically, that all vulgar attempts to wrest the tongue into alien speech ways, ways antagonistic to the natural English way of expression, should be sternly ruled out of court. Language of the sports, the movies, the street, the stage, is often vulgar, banal, foolish, and sometimes vile. Yet it is only fair to add that sometimes from such a source we get an idiom that is clean, strong, picturesque—a real contribution, happy in itself and filling a need. A phrase like "putting it over," or "getting it across," obviously derived from the theater, is certainly a bit of vivid description, and when used in the right place (for there is a wrong or right place for all language use) an objector would be over-squeamish, if not a sissy. A football idiom, like "bucking the center," may be a mannish expression, but to call it "low" is absurd. But to be broad-minded about such additions to the tongue must not lead us to be tolerant of the truly vulgar. To educate a class of people who will create and carry on a quiet, strong opposition to all such violent and inane warpings of the mother-tongue as practised

in the United States is a main job of the Republic.

The only possible way to bring it about is through the sure attainment of a better taste: a taste that shall instinctively shrink away from the abuse of language, under these difficult circumstances. The job is hard in proportion as the danger is immediate and grave. It is silly to deny or dodge it. One may appreciate all that is picturesque and salient in American English, without substituting for straight sound speech the too technical patter of a trade, the patois of a section, or the dialect of gangsters. Let us open our arms to innovations that are in accord with the genius of English, but keep a clear head in order to rebuke in no uncertain terms all disintegrating influences.

To take this position is not to be stuffily conservative or jejune in our use of speech. Now and then, as has been noted, some picturesque idiom derived from some typical great sport like baseball or football, is a welcome addition to the common word-store. At the same time, to adopt without reservation the jargon, quite unintelligible to cultivated foreigners, which appears in the daily reports of these earth-shaking combats, would be to weaken one's sense of the more serious language uses handed down to us from the past, and to be treasured properly as of inestimable value in

steadying, dignifying and normalizing the parent tongue. Fortified by this idea, an American can use his own speech as modified by domestication in this country without fear or favor, neither slavishly imitating the parent English, nor mistakenly believing a given use to be right merely because it is American.

CHAPTER VII

CALLING A SPADE A SPADE

No one paying the slightest attention to speech use in our day can have failed to observe the somewhat terrifying inroads upon the sober reticences of the past made—and increasingly being made—by those who handle English for what may be called artistic purposes. Frankness and freedom are exercised to a degree, at least in the feeling of all who lean to conservatism and are dubbed old-fashioned, that changes true liberty into illegitimate license. One realizes, in watching such a spectacle, that license is the result of liberty in the wrong hands; the hands of those inappreciative of the true meaning of liberty. On all sides at present, in the talk of society, on the stage, in our essay, biography, drama and fiction, the rankest sort of language is permitted and even applauded. If a well-bred person, dead a generation, could be seated in a parquet seat of a Broadway theater and hear the epithets and idioms

hurled over the footlights by actors supposed to represent the actual dialogue of the world, and themselves persons presumably perfectly respectable members of society, our assumed revenant would make a gesture of bewilderment and might well be imagined to return to his long rest, after such an impossible nightmare, with a certain satisfaction.

It has been the wont of scholars to refer to bygone periods, like that of the Elizabethans or the seventeenth-century Restoration drama, as exemplifying times when plain or corrupt speech was at its height; and indeed it has so seemed. But in view of what has happened during the last decade or a little more, it looks as if all earlier manifestations of the desire to call a spade a spade must yield the palm to the latter-day exhibition of profanity, obscenity and all uncleanness. What would once have been called downright filth has gradually crept into our English uses, whether private or public, and the end is not yet. The present writer can remember the day when to say *damn* in a lady's presence was distinctly bad form; now she says it herself first. It no longer makes her declassé; indeed, it gives her class. The sight of a well-bred woman with a cigarette in one hand and a cocktail glass in the other was then impossible. How quaint and redolent of a past dead and gone it all is! In the general imitation by

women of all that is mannish from clothes to cocktails, oaths are not debarred, nor is the patter about sex psychology. When, but recently, a lady remarked to me, "He hasn't any S. A.," I was for a moment puzzled before realizing I was behind the times. She meant sex appeal, of course. In simpler days, one would have said, "He isn't attractive," and let it go at that. Now, we pep up our talk, whether of the club, the drawing-room, the stage or the printed page, decorum disappears as the skirts rise higher, and it all comes somewhat indiscriminately under the name of honesty, comradeship of the sexes, frankness in dealing with the "facts" of life.

In the preservation of the decencies and elegances of speech women have historically been leaders. They are the natural conservators of good speech uses, as they are in general the repositories of that instinct in the race which clings to the better procedure. Men have pathetically looked to women to continue this ascendency, one of the results of which has been an inclination on the part of the male to see woman as one who shall by nature carry on the finer things of social intercourse—language being one of them. But unfortunately, in the general desire of women, already mentioned, to be as masculine as possible in dress, deportment and speech, women sometimes outvie the other sex in

attempts to be tough and all-knowing. A source of purity and nice regard for the more refined virtues of expression is thus dammed off from its older influence by the absurd assumption that sex sets up no differentiation in language, nor in anything else.

With this the situation, what is the right view in the matter of speech uses? Shall we gladly exercise the hard-won privilege of calling a spade a spade, in school and out, rather than an agricultural implement? Is there any limit to our plain-speaking by word of mouth or in art and Letters? These are questions harder than ever to answer with breadth, yet with a sane cleaving to standards (if any) proper in any nation or in any human society where to be civilized is still regarded as a worthy aim. When to use the plain word and when to eschew it for a circumlocution or preferred substitute, when, if ever, the delicacies and daintinesses of English speech may be called into use,—such queries offer an alluring but difficult theme for a book like this one, with its desire to discuss linguistic etiquette in terms of homely reality. How far, too, shall we go in the frenzied attempt to meet the lower orders of society on their own ground, adopting their manners, their language and, it may be, their outlook on and reaction to life? Truly, no easy problem is here involved.

The word *odor* might be termed the literary or esthetic designation of an appeal to the olfactory organ. Next in gradation down-hill would come the word *smell,* not necessarily offensive (since properly we may speak of a sweet smell), yet a little less elegant than *odor.* A peg lower in the descending scale would come *stench,* implying an unpleasant smell; a seemly word, nevertheless, the associations of which, in the Bible and elsewhere, are not low and coarse, but merely emphatic and vigorous. Finally, we arrive at *stink,* which historically is naught but a northern variant of *stench*—the same word exactly but with a variant dress of letters. Now in this gradation from elegant to coarse and objectionable, *odor, smell, stench, stink,* where will you rightly stop? With *smell?* With *stench?* Or shall we admit *stink* for certain moments and occasions, just as the Bible in its fine old vernacular way does, confining it to an occasion when the smell is very bad indeed? Let us realize that this one case in its running of the gamut up or down stands for a principle applying to all words whatsoever when the problem of when to use them and how far to go is up for settlement. Observe, it is all a question of use and connotation. There was once a time in English when *stink* meant simply a smell not only inoffensive but actually agreeable. In a

very ancient Anglo-Saxon poem, the words *stinking blooms* mean, literally, sweet-smelling flowers, a poetic reference. Gradually, *stink* has come to take on its present evil associations. In the Victorian era, let us say, persons of refinement, especially of the sex so many men are now calling the unfair, were chary of the word. To-day, it is more freely used as part of the greater license of the period.

What then, in view of these facts, is a sound attitude toward the whole business of restraint and reticence and etiquette in the use of English? Certainly there exist people still capable of being shocked when, across the footlights, in the presence of an audience composed of all sorts and conditions of men (and two-thirds feminine, at that), representing all grades of education, culture and refinement, or none of them at all, wide-open ears are assailed by words like bastards, whores and sons-of-bitches, and where the listeners are also obliged to hear objurgations bandying the names of the Almighty and his Son deemed by many honest folk to be the Savior of this world. A very few years ago, this public coarseness and vulgarity in speech was not permitted in a theater. We have changed all that. Each season, if you will watch dramatic criticism in New York closely, you will find the critical as-

sertion (apparently offered as a sort of bonne bouche) that those visiting some new "show" will hear for the first time certain juicy epithets and linguistic indiscretions. The situation is not static; it moves forward—and the descent to Avernus seems to be well greased. We are calling a spade a spade with vengeance in the playhouse, and not there alone. In society generally, and with rapid acceleration, there is far more latitude allowed in personal speech habits than was true a generation ago, indeed if we look only a decade behind us.

That this laxity of language has gone too far, many, including the present writer, will hold. In dramas aiming to show the undercurrents of human society, the alluvial deposits of mud and refuse that roil its stream and check its swift flow are assumed to help in creating the illusion of reality and give what is called "wallop" to the desired dramatic effect. Perhaps this is an error, for the reason that when profanity is overdone the emphasis is weakened; one lonesome *damn* in a play otherwise innocent of that mild oath is more effective than a deluge of goddamns assailing our tympanum like Gatling guns. Many dramas seem to forget this.

But all argument goes back to this consideration: any society, any people, is judged, among other tests, by its decorum, fitness and elegance of speech

as an asset to civilization. The coarser, cruder, uneducated elements of any such nation commonly use words and phrases ruled out of polite, cultivated circles simply because they *are* low, coarse and crude. To break down the barriers to such an extent that the superior stratum of society represented by folk of character, culture and social savoir-faire, make use of this unenlightened and monotonous people's speech is calling a spade a spade in the wrong sense. It is reversion to jungle standards so familiar to-day in our music, our painting—in all our arts and Letters: the pose of a too sophisticated and jaded age. It is delayed social infantilism, to introduce into a social structure built up with infinite pains through untold centuries of experiment by trial and error, such a disintegrating influence. To say this, is not at all to attack the value of plain speaking in opposition to the namby-pamby euphemism or gorgonism often characterizing the half-breeds of culture, hitherto described. Within proper limits, and when the privilege is exercised by the right folk, it is always better to use a plain word to indicate a plain thing. But a spade can be used either for the purpose of digging in good red earth, or for shoveling manure. Linguistically, the former would appear the more seemly use. Plain speaking may be high thinking. But, by the same token, it

may also be an illegitimate attempt to return to the ancestral sty. The fact that we once depended from our tails in the primal arboreal habitat is no reason why we should not now regard that appendage as but a rudimentary reminder of origin. Its function has ceased—in civilization.

There is a kind of noble simplicity in plain speech on some occasion when the depths of human nature are stirred, and emotion mounts high. Consider, for example, the absurdity of writing the "agony and bloody perspiration" instead of the classic Bible description of our Lord's suffering as the "agony and bloody sweat." One shudders at such a perversion of words. Yet, can it be denied that perspiration is the more "refined" word of the two? But such an occasion demanded words of the utmost, grave, Anglo-Saxon simplicity,—and got them.

Among the onlookers at a polo match played on a private estate in the West and before an invited audience of presumable ladies and gentlemen, four young people, two girls and their attendant males, exchanged language within the hearing of others so rankly blasphemous and obscene that only hearing was believing. It is foolish to turn away from such startling revelations. They depict an alarming state of affairs. To blink at the facts will not rectify

them, and it is the part of good citizenship to try to stem the tide. First, a consciousness of its truth, and next, a conscience to war against it, will help the cause of good speech, good manners, good morals.

My use of the word *manners* puts us on the way to suggested betterment. Calling a spade a spade in the undesirable sense here described and illustrated, is a sad and serious offense against taste. On that ground, if no other, such license and laxity, such vulgarity and beastliness, should be throttled. We are in this book considering good English not only as a convenience and a pleasure, but as a form of both personal and national self-respect, one of the tests by which a people's social evolution can be discovered. For a foreigner to sit in one of our fashionable and, to the eye, beautiful theaters and hear from the lips of alleged representatives of the best society language fit only for the gutter, the bagnio, the dance-halls and the dusky corners where the degraded dregs of cities haunt and hide, is not a way to advertise our social and cultural status abroad among the nations. Instinctively, come to mind those noble words of Lowell in the great *Commemoration Ode*:

"Among the nations bright beyond compare."

Let us remember it is just possible that in the audience where we are being judged by one from afar, there may be more than one with truly civilized standards to judge us by. And let us blush at the possibility.

The point, then, I am striving to make in this chapter is that confusion must be avoided between a much-to-be-desired practise of using simple direct speech, especially when simple things are described and simple matters involved, and an indulgence in rank speech for its own sake, and as a manifesto of a newly acquired liberty that on close inspection turns out to be nothing but license in disguise. And thinking of this principle as it applies to language, the safe test is the esthetic one. The best reason for not reverting to vile speech, out of place for civilized or even half-civilized people, is that it is frightfully bad taste, and should be offensive to anybody possessed of that commodity. Such uses are brutal, ugly, repellent to an educated palate for fine words, fit words, words of breeding and legitimate meaning, words that have the connotations desirable for their use in a given place in the sentence. Breeding in a human being is desirable. Exactly as true is it that breeding in word use is desirable, and, moreover, an indication of breeding in the person selecting the word for use. There still is (and always will

be, unless Anglo-Saxon civilization joins that of Persia or Greece in fading into a memory) a difference and a distinction between *odor* and *stink*. The latter, though it may have its place among the meanings of smell, is by the esthetic test a disagreeable word, and to be charily made use of accordingly. Perhaps the whole argument can be formulated into a rule something like this: Do not, in a spirit of braggadocio, reminding of our small-boy days, flaunt a shocking word as we move about among our fellows. Realize that gentility is judged by its fruits, not merely by its proffered pedigrees.

Daring violations of decency do not mark social development, but the reverse. Nor are esthetic considerations entirely to be divorced from manners and morals. The three interlink. Good taste is almost sure to go arm-in-arm with good conduct. And legitimate frankness of expression, which has in this chapter been denominated calling a spade a spade, can only be allowed to degenerate into the license that brings vulgarity and impurity at the cost of slipping down to a lower level of culture and character. Let your words be *yea, yea,* and *nay, nay,* for that is the right way of simplicity. But let them respect the high and holy, realizing that the words, "Evil communications corrupt good manners," are as true now as when first uttered.

CHAPTER VIII

ENGLISH AS SHE IS SPOKE

THERE is always a difference between spoken and written English. A sense of this is conveyed when it is said of somebody that he "talks like a book." Obviously it is not intended in compliment. We must ask ourselves why, to understand the difference to which I refer.

Written speech is formal, exact, fully expanded, and more correct. It always comes later in time than spoken speech, and is a more self-conscious younger brother, the result of a more sophisticated period, and ever inclined to get away, more or less, from the broken, nervous, half-expressed spontaneousness of speech that comes hot from the lips of men and women. Contrary to this, spoken words are the origin and first birth of all language whatsoever. It is therefore more natural (written speech is more of a convention), more idiomatic, less perfect in its grammatical form, as one might expect,

but having one supreme virtue, making it superior to written speech: the virtue of natural, quick-born, newly minted and fluent utterance.

Because of these contrasted qualities of speech written and spoken, we go to spoken speech by preference when we want to study idiom. We know it will be fuller of imperfections, of mistakes and carelessnesses, but we are also sure that it will have the breath of life in it and come closest to the beating heart and the emotional depths of the users of English. We might express our meaning by saying that spoken English is an instinct, written English an art. M. Jourdain, in Molière's play, was surprised to learn he was speaking prose. He supposed he was just talking. Similiarly, any user of English for the ordinary purposes of conversation, might be surprised to know he was making idiom: whereas, set to write something, he would screw his tongue into the corner of his mouth and regard it as a hard task. The merit, then, of spoken speech, is the merit of vitality. It is nearest to the birthday of the language. It may be less literary, but it will have the accent and the gait of life.

A proof of the distinction I make can be found in the fact that it is only the highly trained, skilful, resourceful writer who, in his writing, best imitates the sound and the curvatures of spoken speech. It

is the unpractised writer who appears most formal, stiff and awkward when he turns from the easy flow of the spoken word to the more precise movement of the printed page. Being idiomatic in print, means imitating the easy-going style of talk, viva voce, as we get it in conversation. The closer print comes to spoken speech, the more we praise it, and call it good literature. The great letter-writers of the race, for instance, Fanny Burney, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Horace Walpole in the past, or later, Lamb, Stevenson, Walter Scott, Shelley, are those whose talk on paper has the inimitable, seemingly careless, offhand, familiar, yet never vulgar note of the best conversation.

But however true it may be that the nearer printed language comes to the vernacular ease of speech, the better literature it is, there is, after all, always a difference. Written speech, to attain the best results, must imitate the fluent naturalness of the spoken word, strive to approach its idiomatic freshness and its avoidance of all that seems unpleasantly bookish, but at the same time, must eliminate its incoherencies, its too elliptic short-cuts, and at times its almost chaotic struggles in the attempt to get over its meaning. Take the one matter of repetitions. If you will listen to any conversation under way between two people unaware

that you are eavesdropping, you will possibly be astonished to discover how few of the sentences exchanged are ever completed, and how wearisomely some thought is repeated over and over again, often in the very same phrasing, too. One would not believe that educated persons (for they do it almost as much as do the untutored) would ever consent to waste time by this reiteration. But so it is. Few mortals are satisfied in conversation to state a thing once, and let it go at that. They do it over again as if on the assumption that it will not penetrate the ear of the listener if only said once. And perhaps there is something in this conviction. People have become accustomed to getting the news several times in this fashion and so fall into the habit of only half listening the first time.

But this tiresome, unnecessary repetition must be sternly elided when it comes to print. That is one thing that makes literature different, properly, from life itself. Dialogue on the printed page can not (save at the writer's peril) present the raggedness and loose ends of talk. If you wish to see how dreadful it is when this is not avoided, pick up some day Joyce's *Ulysses,* opening the book at random, and learn how the author, in the mistaken desire to show in literature exactly how it is in life, reports the conversation of his characters. To read it is

to be bored to a degree that literature has seldom attained to,—which is saying much.

Another habit of spoken speech, as constrasted with what is written, is that of the incompleted sentence. Watch conversation again, and you will find that something like half that is uttered when two persons are engaged in the exchange of thought—and this is all the truer when the number is more—is never brought to a neat sentence stop. It is left hung up in mid-air, because the hearer understands the omitted half, and, impatient to speak himself, breaks in on the other. Or even if not interrupted, the speaker can by his intonation, perhaps assisted by a lift of the eyebrows or a shrug of the shoulders (many are the aids to speech in this way), show what he meant without the labor of filling out his meaning with added words. Often, a telephone conversation on the stage gets its humor from the way in which the person at this end of the line is unable to finish anything he is trying to convey, because the person on the other end continually butts in. The audience gets the meaning by a sort of shorthand, and is amused thereby. Through its imagination, it supplies the ellipses and short-cuts.

Now, it is difficult and dangerous, and on the whole inadvisable, to reproduce this incompletion in the written word. It makes too jerky and cryptic

effects; more smoothness, for the eye and also the ear, is demanded when we come to print. Possibly convention has something to do with this demand, but it is more than that. There is more time to be critical when one reads words in print; the hearer passes over a hundred imperfections, where the reader, carefully examining the page before him, has not only time but inclination to scrutinize what he reads and judge it by a standard that holds it up to more exactitude and perfection.

It is characteristic of our day in literature, that as never before we have striven to imitate closely, accurately and faithfully these broken rhythms of life, as they might be called. In my opinion, we have gone too far, for the result often has been near to chaos in the reporting of reality in, for instance, the fictional art, or in drama. In doing this, an aim praiseworthy if not carried too far, a risk has been run, with a penalty attached that sometimes ruins the effect: the risk in trying to imitate life, of producing confusion, pain and bewilderment, where the true aim of all art should be pleasure. Many know the writings of a story-maker like Fannie Hurst. She is, at her best, an able and enjoyable writer of fiction. But in attempting to give us the accent of life, she not seldom writes in such a curiously condensed fashion that a sort of personal hieroglyphic

is the result, instead of true style, that artistically represents the way folk talk on this earth. Authors who overdo this make their dialogue sound like the terse stage directions of the theater. The golden mean for the artists trying to reproduce life on the printed page would seem to be to give a hint of the broken speech of the street, the mart or the home, yet add a deceptive added perfection, the difference, as I am saying, that always marks, or should mark, the way of literature from the way of life.

Another point should be made which involves a rather curious fact of English speech. Whenever it comes to a question of idiom, the sound vernacular uses which lie at the bottom of what is best and happiest in English style, it is spoken, not written speech we may turn to with confidence that we shall get the truth. Real idiom comes from the lips rather than from the pens of those who make use of the mother-tongue. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but the tongue is mightier than the pen, when it comes to language. I suppose it is for the reason that people have been talking much longer in human history than they have been writing. Anyhow, trust the statement that when some bit of expression leaps hot from the mouth of somebody, like Bunyan, with a penchant for good English, as unlettered as he was, but with an instinct for ver-

nacular expression, it will, if it gets into a book like *The Pilgrim's Progress,* be expression born of the immediate needs of talk, the rapid interchange of conversations, the phrasing of the outdoors and the open, not of the study or shut-in self-consciousness of literary folk. The scholar may seize it and mold it, but if wise, he gets it from the people.

This leads me to my final point, which is this: idiom, broadly speaking, comes from the spoken utterance of the people at large, including those who lack formal education, and not from the specialist and super-calendared product of the schools. This may seem almost like a reflection upon education, but no matter. It is the simple truth. I have just spoken of Bunyan, and he affords the finest example of what is in mind to be found in the entire range of English literature. Let me dilate on him for a little.

His position in letters is as peculiar as it is unassailed. When his masterpiece, *The Pilgrim's Progress,* appeared toward the end of the seventeenth century, it was eagerly, steadily read, purchased and talked about, ten editions being demanded within a few years. But its circulation was confined almost exclusively to the middle and lower classes; largely to Baptists and other dissenters in religion, instead of the polite, cultivated people who

belonged to the Established Church; to people of devout faith, and humble, simple life, likely to be moved by the greatest of all religious allegories. It was only much later that gradually it came to be perceived that here, entirely aside from any question of religion, was a novel, picturesque and deeply true representation of the eternal struggle in the soul of man between the Devil and God, or to put it in a more modern way, between the contending forces of good and evil, ever at war for the possession, in this world and the next, of man's spiritual welfare. The universality of the appeal, and of the book as its embodiment, came to be recognized, so that *The Pilgrim's Progress* took its place by degrees, first, then ever more firmly and permanently, as the finest thing of its kind ever written by an English pen.

But also after the common folk had elected to make it known, and tardily, those of social importance and culture ratified the judgment; more and more it was accepted with the passing of the years, as a wonderful piece of creative English expression. Not only the importance of the theme was realized more clearly, but Bunyan's style was given the credit it deserved, and at last, as we now regard him and his work, it has become the acceptable critical verdict to praise the form of the allegory,

the manner of his expression, awarding the prize as much for the art displayed, however unconscious the artist, and for the esthetic significance of the literary creation, as for any merit it may possess for moral meanings or instruction in the ways of God with men. It has come to be studied and appreciated as a literary performance, a foremost consideration in estimating literary art. And Bunyan's style is now pointed to as the main reason for his preeminence.

That style of his it will pay any reader of this book on English to study carefully, aside from the many other reasons for reading the story of the spiritual life it illuminates. Here is a man of the people, a tinker and a son of a tinker, uneducated in the scholarly sense, his reading confined to the Bible and Fox's *Book of Martyrs,* a minister without the usual theological training,—yet behold what happens. Basing his book on the incomparable diction of the Authorized Version of the Scriptures, upon which we were all brought up, he produced a piece of writing that is the envy of all the literati. What is the meaning of such a miracle? Why, simply this: the Bible is the best idiom we have in all English utterance. Bunyan, sticking closest to it for his inspiration, produced a book that is the finest carrier-on of the tradition of Bible beauty for strong, sweet, sinewy Anglo-Saxon, anywhere to be

found during the thousand years of English expression. Usually the select minority settles the question of literary excellence. In this case, uniquely, the common people settled it; the select had to agree. To get idiom into your system, read Bunyan and the Bible. The qualities behind Bible diction receive more particular attention later in this book. Just here, when the world has been celebrating the tercentenary of Bunyan's birth, it is especially fitting to speak of him as a writer.

CHAPTER IX

PRACTICAL ENGLISH AND ESTHETIC ENGLISH

All language is used for one of two purposes. Either its prime object is the communication of thought, or the impartation of pleasure. If the former, which no doubt is the aim in the overwhelming majority of instances, since mankind is always anxious to say something that shall convey a meaning to somebody else, and is eminently practical in that aim, esthetic considerations would seem to be ruled out. But whenever, as sometimes happens, there is the intention and desire to give more than information, to use words in such wise that over and above all practical considerations there is an added satisfaction in the manner of expression, then the appeal is esthetic and we get literary art, literature, not information alone as a result, but (for the trained ear) delight in the manipulation of words for their own sake.

One can clearly make this discrimination between

the two appeals: the appeal practical, and the appeal esthetic. It is evident that when you call up your expressman to ask him to come for your trunk at two o'clock, your only wish is to convey your meaning, succinctly and with clarity. You care nothing for any possible joy the expressman may get out of the way you handle the sentence. You would in fact regard him as a candidate for a lunatic asylum, if he sat down and went into a swoon of joy over the way you said it. And that telephone call stands for two-thirds of all the language use in the world. Words are a medium through which we transact the daily humdrum business of life, entering into relations with our fellows, and endeavoring to get on with our affairs with their assistance. However, when we sit down to form a sentence to put in a letter, to speak directly to the person involved, or to place properly in a piece of fiction we are writing, it may happen we care as much, possibly more, about the way we say it than about the thing said.

Plain as this distinction is between the two aims in the use of words, whether spoken or written, they are not so easily kept apart in reality as is here represented. They often overlap, and close scrutiny reveals that so often does this happen that to separate practical language from language esthetic is harder than at first appeared.

The political orator, wishing to sway his audience to his own view, though he may be talking about very practical things like prohibition or the tariff, and his aim may be intensely practical as well, will influence those addressed very largely according as he gives oratorical value, that is esthetic and emotional value, to his words and their handling in sentences. Likewise, the commercial man is likely to beat his fellow workers on commissions and sales in proportion as he talks persuasively, that is, eloquently, with an appeal to the ear, and with a pleasure to his customers born of tickling their palates with his phrases. Even a down-and-outer borrowing money is more likely to get the loan if he has skill and cunning in the selection and arrangement of his words, backed by a good voice. On reflection it will be seen that it is the exception when into the purely practical use of English there does not enter this other element of persuasion, this assault upon the emotions, which carries the practical over into the esthetic, making them blend more or less.

Hence, we may deduce the following: there are few cases in our daily use of language, when some effect desirable in itself, no matter how matter-of-fact the purpose, is not secured by such handling of words as to produce feelings of pleasure (however

unrecognized) in those who read or listen. And thus we see that some attention to this esthetic aspect of language is well worth the trouble for almost all human beings. As we extend our vocabulary, we extend our power over others, influencing them to our ends. As we become more sensitive to the different appeals of words, now small, now great, according to their connotation (a scholastic word meaning all the associations they call up as one uses them), in that measure do we increase our chance of getting our way with fellow mortals in all the concerns of life. Hence, not the literary artists alone, but all who have to use words in their business, and who prosper therein in proportion as they use them well, should have a very real, immediate interest in this matter of good English.

When the salesman, just mentioned, approaches a prospective customer, shall he drop into the slovenly slang probably used by most of his associates, or shall he attract the attention of the man he would sell his goods to by an excellence of diction, a care in the selection of words, a wider grasp of them, and a certain effect of elegance gained from clear articulation and some style in the pronunciation of language? It is quite a question. And not impossible that the customer, who may not be entirely dead to fine English, will favor such a

man and lend a willing ear to his talk: good talk, in place of cheap patter in the jargon of "the line of goods" he is carrying. The experiment might be worth trying, anyway. Of course, I am not advising the use of words in such wise as to give an effect of unnaturalness, of "talking like a book," in the wrong sense. That would be foolish and lose him business, we may concede. But who can gainsay the fact that any talk, with an object of selling something to another person, can be given a flavor that is personal, salient and attractive? Go back in memory to that expensive set of books an agent induced you to buy, a purchase you bitterly regretted when it was too late, and realize how much there is in what the rhetorics call persuasiveness in speech. Why, that agent fairly hypnotized you into buying a set of books you did not need, nor have shelf-room for; and he did it by his use of words, exactly in that way. He played on your emotions, stirred up your feelings, to the degree where buying seemed as logical as it was easy—until the monthly payments began, and the agent's presence no longer distracted you from the cold truth.

In the light of these facts it would seem legitimate to make a strong plea for the recognition of a certain esthetic value in so-called practical English, English, that is, that has a practical aim and end, that

is not in the least "literary," and, one thinks at first, need try for nothing but clear meaning. The problem, I hope it is plain, is far more complex than that, and it is a mistake, and a bad one, not to consider in all our linguistic uses both the practical and esthetic results.

I used that rather repellent word, *connotation.* It will bear further discussion and illustration. Every word we use comes to us murmuring with meanings caught from all the other words it has been associated with during the long time it has been in existence. At first it might seem as if its meaning were quite independent of its associations; but that is never so. It has a color, and a value in any sentence it is used in, that derives from its whole history. A word in this respect is exactly like a man: you judge him from a hundred things which imply his past contacts, affiliations, associations, and his dress, deportment, speech, all that goes to make up personality, produce on you a certain effect, enabling you to place him in the social scale, award him his place in the world of men. And thus is it with a word as well.

Take the familiar word *dog.* It is a plain, unornamental designation of the animal canine, nothing more. But suppose, in a sentence you use instead the word *hound.* A different train of associations is

stirred. You mean the same animal, but his record is not quite the same. The word *hound* has wider suggestions, that of the hunting field perhaps for one. It makes the dog sound a little more literary, as we might say. Or, to return to that scholastic word we started out with, the connotation of *hound* is greater than that of *dog*. A similar parallel may be seen in the word *horse,* set beside *steed*. The first is horse unadorned, stripped of associations save the most direct and practical; the second makes you think of Walter Scott, or some other writer of romance. The *steed* is the *horse* glorified, so to express it.

This brace of simple illustrations should indicate what is in mind when we speak of the connotations of words. It suggests that synonyms of words, or similar words used for the same thing, are really variants describing how one word in its time plays many parts, and that any use of a given word is a delicate test of our sense of this wonderful, rich, variegated history of words in general, making us use this or that word according to the key of our speaking or writing, the setting, the kind of atmosphere we wish to evoke from our word combination, the sort of response, emotional or intellectual, we would elicit from the audience. It takes tact, experience, wide contacts with both men and

books, sympathetic touch with those our words would seek to influence, to know just how to manipulate them, having clear in mind their infinite connotations, as briefly described here.

Imagine a political leader addressing an audience and wishing to say something about the agrarian population, to win their support. He would be likely to refer to them in some such phrase as "the sturdy farmer folk who are fundamental in our economic life"—which would not be untrue. He knows the word *farmer* is in nowise offensive to that class of citizens. Suppose, however, in his attempt to gain their favor, he used the word *yokels,* instead of farmer folk. Need it be said that his political chances would perish on the spot? Yet, why? *Yokel* may be taken to mean a farmer, or as the word implies, one who has to do with the oxen's yoke. The point is, of course, that it carries with it a sort of contempt, an implied superiority in the speaker; the *yokel* is seen from the city view-point as a country bumpkin. The color of the word is not unlike (though it is of much longer life and therefore has far wider, richer associations) that of the current slang word, *hick.* To return to our more learned way of stating it, the connotation of *yokel* is of a kind that any political speaker worth his salt, and having even a rudimentary appreciation

of word values, would avoid as he would the foul fiend. Another example, then, of the importance of connotation in the use of words.

Truth is, behind that stupid scholastic word, *connotation,* lies all the rich, varicolored, changeful fortunes of words: their ups and downs of Fate, which make them nothing but the image of the fortunes and misfortunes of mankind who created them. Astonishing, indeed, is the story. It involves the melodramatic contrasts, the pathetic turns of luck, the masking of words behind many a disguise, and the odd way in which language, like misery, makes strange bedfellows. It is neither more nor less than the vast, amazing story of man himself that is registered in the ever-fluctuating embodiment of speech. An illustration is in order. Duns Scotus is spoken of as the last of the great medieval schoolmen. In his time, his was a name to conjure with. But like other great men, before and since, he had his enemies, and fell into disfavor. And, lo, his first name, under the altered spelling, *dunce,* becomes an epithet to hurl at the stupid pupil sitting in disgrace in a corner and wearing his dunce's cap. Could there be anything more ironic?

Coming back now to the discrimination with which we started out,—between the practical and esthetic values in language,—I trust it is fairly

evident that in all our word uses an appreciation of the tremendous power of what might be called the pleasure side of words, the side that has to do with the artistic handling of words and phrases, enters into all aspects of conversation, writing, intercommunication. And that a corollary to this is, that the more any person whatever, irrespective of creed, condition and kind, enlarges his vocabulary and becomes more widely aware of these emotional powers and possibilities of words, the more will he get in his hands a weapon to be wielded to great advantage in life's daily battle. So true is this, that it becomes a glaring mistake arbitrarily to divide language into two separate parts: the language used by artists, literary folk, dilettanti of the esthetic values of words, a small unimportant fraction of mankind, and that of the rest of us, the dominant millions who use the tongue. I hope even this brief treatment of the subject will have shown that such separation of language into the practical and esthetic is a false one, and simply does not hold water when we come to examine a little into it. The practical person needs the esthetic value of words in his business, just as the esthete needs to know the value of commonsensible, every-day use a hundred times a day. If the esthete is unaware of these homely daily uses his feet are off the ground, and

he wabbles vaguely in the air; but, equally true, if the practical handler of the mother-tongue tries to eliminate all those juices from language which make it mellow, pleasant, musical, emotional, he is crippling his success in his craft, business, or employment of whatever kind. And moreover, he *can't* do it,—for the very good reason that he has a heart, and at some moment of life, his heart will speak, emotion will express itself through speech, and then the picturesque, the forceful and the imaginative will begin to creep into his utterance. Or to express it in another way, his connotation will increase, and the esthetic quality of his words and sentences, whether he knows it or not, wishes it or not, will give greater attraction to what he says.

Education has one of its greatest opportunities for service in this field. In the first place, it can draw attention to the value and importance of language, both as a means of communication and a medium for pleasure. Next, it can (and should, far more than at present) utilize such means to the end as the reading of the best authors, debates, dramatics, language taught by the conversational method, and oratorical contests in which the import and significance of words are illustrated and brought home. And in all such studies, the idea should steadily be held before the student that the human

voice is an instrument marvelously adapted to secure effects of advantage to its owner, and up to now neglected almost entirely, or at least minimized in its importance, so that it is misused to a well-nigh unbelievable extent. I have touched on this at more length elsewhere in this book. Education, public or private, should remind all those instructed that the one basal distinction between man and beast is that man has evolved a highly elaborate vehicle called language, while the animal world has not. And that language means words and their uses: not words alone, but words put into action by human beings as they move about and associate with fellow men.

CHAPTER X

HIGH-SOUNDING WORDS: AN AMERICAN TENDENCY

THERE is a tendency, almost an instinct in the American, to use and to prefer high-sounding words. The American, as such, likes to be unsimple and grandiloquent when it comes to his manner of expression. He enjoys "slinging language," as the saying goes. He is not content with saying a *real-estate man,* so has to use *realtor. Undertaker* seems to be too matter of fact, so he substitutes *mortician.* And so on with countless familiar examples of this trait, which might be described as a liking for plush English.

Just why in a so-called democratic country like ours, this habit which has so strong an impulse behind it, should have arisen, is not so easy to determine. In reflecting on it, I sometimes ask if it is an inferiority complex. Are we secretly so modest and uncertain of our speech uses, that, like the boy whistling to keep his courage up when he

passes the graveyard, we make a brave show of ornamental, colorful words and phrases? Possibly that is part of it. Or, for another theory, is it the result of half-baked education? Our popular scheme of public-school training is defective in thoroughness, according to its critics at least, and sends our young folk whizzing through the educational mill at such rapid rate that they do not come out into the world with a clear sense of the enormous value, in culture, of saying a plain thing in a plain way, instead of dressing it up incongruously in all the rainbow tints of rhetoric. A lot of people, in my observation, think it better English to say *retire,* than to say *go to bed.* Or, *to remove your outer garment,* rather than, *take off your coat.* The British know better than this (their education is more thoroughgoing), and that is why they settle on the simple English monosyllable *lift* for our Latinistic *elevator.* Homely words for a homely thing or occasion, is a fairly safe rule to follow, but it takes a great deal of education to feel this to be true. In saying this I am aware of an apparent contradiction with what has already been said in defense of sticking to the American *elevator* instead of the British equivalent *lift,* in the discussion of the idioms of the two lands. But the former argument simply pleads for the use of *elevator* in this country

because it has been adopted and become our natural way of expressing that thing. The superiority of one over the other is quite a different matter.

Perhaps, too, the mixture of races now so universal in the United States plays a part in this liking for high-sounding words and phrases. Some of the nations we are endeavoring to assimilate, with more or less indigestion during the process, are very polite races, with a way of using extremely nice speech to cover the every-day happenings of life. A French maid, for illustration, will say, "Madame is served," in place of "Dinner is ready," and her mistress does not feel she is fully proficient unless she says it. We are often called, by hostile observers, a mannerless people, which makes it all the more curious that the alleged mannerlessness does not extend to language. On the other hand, we indulge in showy turns of expression and idioms that are ornate much more than is the habit of our British brothers. Explain it as you will, it is so. We hang on to the word *telegraph,* where the English long since have fixed on the appealingly simple *wire,* a word which is now gradually ousting the Greek derivative over here.

Having chanced to illustrate with that word *telegraph,* let me go on to say that when the aim is to study terse effective simplicity of speech, I know

of nothing in the world more hopeful and valuable than a ten-word telegram. I do not care how much literary experience a person has had, whether he may have been in the writing game for a long lifetime, it is splendid training, and teaches you much, just to get your meaning into those few necessary words. It teaches condensation, simplicity, exactness, all prime virtues, and any time a stenographer is instructed to get the gist of her employer's message into a straight telegram, he having merely indicated what he wants, leaving the reduction and clear transmission of thought to her, she has one of the best bits of training in the use of the mother-tongue that can be imagined. No school exercise can better aid her in the clarification of thought, the sinewy directness that, arrow-like, wings its way to the mark, and the stern elimination of all that is superfluous. You have heard the definition of love, "the last word in a telegram," and have smiled at it. But think a moment; a love-story of five hundred pages is only an elaboration of what that one word conveys. Some man tells some woman he loves her; what more is a long novel about, pray? (Only, in the modern novel it is said to several women.) I honestly believe we can to-day learn as much concerning exact, effective and felicitous speech by concocting telegrams as by any other method.

Just now the two words *man* and *woman* were used. Does it occur to any one that it would have been more decorous and high-class to say *lady* and *gentleman?* Here we get another example, pat to our purpose. I said *man* and *woman,* because there was no object in communicating the additional fact (which might, of course, be valuable information at some other time or occasion) that the two persons in view had social standing. Americans, as part of the peculiar sensitiveness to high-sounding terms I am dilating on, are quite too careful about this *lady* and *gentleman* matter. They show, by their insistence on an expression like *washer-lady,* that they have a pathetic eagerness to tell the world a woman can wash clothes, yet remain socially desirable. It is a kind of give-away, for it plainly enough indicates a certain uneasiness of mind. Secretly, we wonder, if we happen to be the washer-woman, if any one we deign to wash for rates us low for that reason! Hence, we are very touchy if the mere generic word, *woman,* is flung at us; whereas, the great lady is never so complimented as when we flatter womanliness by calling her a *woman.* She is safe in her social position, you see, and so isn't suffering from that same inferiority complex of which this seems to be another specimen. I once knew an American woman who married an

Italian count, and in writing her, I addressed the letter to Countess So-and-So. She answered with a surprising vigor, "For *God's* sake, drop the countess!" It bored her to be thus addressed. But it surely is an American characteristic to be over-sensitive about *lady* and *gentleman,*—and a proof that our social class lines are more vaguely drawn than in an aristocratic land like the mother country. We lay it on thick with language in proportion as we recognize that under the surface there is, or has been, much that was crude, unformed, hit-or-miss.

I made reference to the realtor. He is a great fellow to use rosy-colored words, and an illustration is the way he juggles *house* and *home.* He is never content to sell you a house, which is all he *can* sell you; he advertises it as a *home,* which is all wrong, because a home is a house turned into a home in the only possible way it can be done, that is, by folks living in it. A house is a thing of wood, stone, bricks, mortar. A home is that same house warmed and made human by the associations and experiences of daily living. Lucky those who dwell therein if the house does become a home in the true sense! But, no, your realtor can not refrain from looking ahead, getting highfalutin and promising something quite beyond his power to give. What a vast number of houses have been built, compared with the few

homes, really-truly homes, that have resulted. When you say, "He built a fine home last year," you are unintentionally praising the gentleman's family!

Everybody is aware that Lincoln's famous Gettysburg speech is pointed to as a model of American oratory. Perhaps fewer have asked themselves just why it is so chosen from the mass of native utterance of a public and important character. Take up the speech and read it once more, and you will discover that its virtue is simplicity: a direct, fit, unornamental, concrete and quietly eloquent expression of some lofty and universal truths. It would be the easiest thing in the world to spoil it by circumlocution, bombast, decoration and the flowers of speech so common in cheaper oratory. There is something massive and immensely impressive in Lincoln's brief sentences, plain Biblical diction and restrained emotion. No piece of writing by an American more effectively teaches the value of avoiding the high-sounding style which means the use of words incongruous to the thought of the speaker. If we are quite honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that to read the elder specimens of American oratory is to feel them as too grandiloquent, too given over, for our modern taste, to sentences that seem high-flown and heavy. Edward Everett, Charles Sumner, even Daniel Webster come

within the observation. On one occasion in the Senate, Sumner wished to call his opponent by the name of an animal not noted for his appeal to our sense of smell. He did it in this Chesterfieldian way: "Again the gentleman has switched his tongue, and the offensive odor of his speech fills this chamber." It is a safe wager that the high sound of the words did not diminish the hostile ardor of the person attacked.

It has been cleverly said that the use of words divides into language and slanguage. We are all taught in school that slang, or, according to etymology, language that is slung, is vulgar and therefore to be shunned. But the question is, what do you mean by slang? Further thought on it is necessary, and a careful distinction must be made, for otherwise our position will be insecure when we wish to lay down the law on a matter we are all vitally interested in,—for the excellent reason that we all have to use words, and desire to do so in an effective fashion. Slang, properly viewed, is new idiom that is silly, meaningless and vulgar to a sensitive ear and taste. Any day you like, such words, phrases, ways of saying things, can be heard on all sides on the lips of people who are not trying to do anything but communicate their thought to some fellow mortal.

Many years ago there was a sentence which shows

how extra-foolish the same sort of gutter-born expressions become after their immediate slangy use has been forgotten. The sentence was this: "There he goes with his eye out!" Could anything be more asinine than that? Yet, it had the same sort of ephemeral vogue that is now, or was, true of *apple-sauce.* Both, and all such, enjoy a life of the brevity of butterflies which we see fluttering about our heads for a single day; only the butterflies are beautiful.

On the other hand, there are expressions, newly coined and therefore wrongly set down as slang by the unthinking, which at once show such a fitness and felicity and feeling for the genius of English speech as to give them true life and a chance to persist and be useful. When we speak of "getting a cinch on" something, we are using such an idiom, perhaps a generation in use. As a figure of speech, it sends us back to a picturesque cowboy origin, something clean, outdoors and native American; so that it has lasted long, and is likely to be used beyond our own day.

But silly-isms, clownish turns of expression, are always with us, and are to be frowned upon by all who have the interests of good speech at heart. The other day the word *privacity* was encountered in print; apparently the opposite to *publicity.* But one reminds oneself that already we have *privacy,*

and so the coinage looks like the tendency to plush English, feeding the instinct for unnecessarily pompous and long-winded language.

Perhaps ex-President Harding's *normalcy* is not in quite the same category, since while *normality* already existed, a certain other color is imparted by the later word. But it is pretty sure that any person who would introduce some new locution (or one personally conducted, so to put it, from an older source) must make it instantly evident that a needed additional aid to expression is offered, not a mere high-sounding flourish of personal use.

We seem to have got hold of a principle here, and it is this: new words, phrases, sentences, idioms, are not necessarily slang in the wrong sense. They may be acceptable as imaginative, pleasing, needed additions to our word use, and the test is whether they *do* fill a need, replace happily some outworn bit of diction, are not too technical, low or obscure, and seem to be created in the spirit of the English that has weathered Time and is still going strong. Notice that expression just used by me: *going strong*. It should be evident that while such a turn of speech is very idiomatic, it is not low or vulgar; on the contrary, it has a smack of mother-earth to it, and instantly can be understood, now or a generation hence, one would suppose.

A friend, wishing to apologize for entering a conversation going on between two other men friends, and introducing another topic, put it this way: "Sorry, I seem to have butted in on a double play." Given the occasion, such idiomatic speech, however out of place in the polite exchange of the drawing-room, had a vigor and picturesqueness that made it relishable, at least to one listener. To place it on a par with some of the meaningless expressions just referred to, would not be fair. The color of the occasion has much to do in settling all such uses.

It happens that Fred Stone, the loved comedian, is temporarily disabled from pursuing his profession by an airplane accident, and another famous figure in the native life, Will Rogers, is taking his place in Stone's current "show"; an advertisement of the fact, declares that Rogers is "pinch hitting for his friend Stone." To put this on a par with the truly vulgar and low would be, to the present witness, a mistake. The satisfied smile with which we greet it, does not declare us lost souls, linguistically or otherwise.

The moral of this part of the discussion would seem to be: don't be *too* fearful of new speech, for it may be excellent, and there is nothing against it because it is new. Yet at the same time, be wary if any new bit of speech be muddy in meaning, and

of vulgar, grotesque or absurd suggestion. Discriminate between *language* and *slanguage,* so as to avoid, on the one side, namby-pamby, too ladylike utterance, yet on the other, what is essentially cheap, silly and common. Steering thus a midway course, will be best for any one in his social speech relations. And it will prove a useful hint as well in one's business relations.

Any stenographer who lives up to her opportunities can help. The chief aim of that worker would seem to be to receive the words of others, and reproduce them with accuracy and dispatch. Granted. But I believe that such a worker, possessing either innately or by training a sense of the felicities and proprieties of English speech, can be of great additional value to her employer, and can influence said employer into better speech uses and the correction of the faults that thickly gather about business English. For the business man, as such, falls into a jargon, more or less, and has an inclination to use high-sounding words, instead of words and idioms that are simple, happy and to the point. "Your esteemed favor of the sixth ultimo was answered as per my letter"—that sort of thing is rather bad. And the stenographer sensitive to fine uses can, if tactful, steer her employer toward more normal and pleasing English, and so make herself worth more salary, in the end.

If the business man must use his particular stripe of commercial English in his office, he should have the grace to put it off, along with his day clothes, when he goes home and enters his life social. The word *proposition* occurs to my mind. "That's another proposition" may be endurable at the office, but has an objectionable ring at a dinner-table. When I sit in some University Club, where all the members are college graduates, I have a right to expect to hear not commercial English but the cultured speech of those whose training has been liberal. For the most part, the expectation is not gratified. I get little or no proof that they ever walked through a college. Perhaps because that is exactly what they did, assisted thereto by the elective system of studies.

CHAPTER XI

LINGUISTIC MODES AND MANNERS

How can it be explained that to the British the use of the word *bloody,* a plain, inoffensive enough word to an American, is so terribly taboo that they write it timidly b——y, and Bernard Shaw in his play *Pygmalion* but a few years ago committed what may be called a social offense by placing it in the mouth of a character? Or how comes it that to a German, the exclamation, *donnerwetter,* meaning neither more nor less than *thunder weather* is out of place in polite society? Such facts forcibly remind us of the purely conventional nature of all speech use, indicating that language has its modes and manners, even as is true of most things human. To put so comparatively innocuous a word as *bloody* on the expurgated list can only signify that the British *agree* to do so, whereupon that adjective becomes more objectionable than it would appear to be anywhere else among the nations. And that in

Berlin's best circles a word that carries back to a day when the Scandinavian gods ruled the roost, has still a sinister implication, albeit Christianity has obtained there many centuries, only shows that peoples have long memories. Language in its making, figures of speech as they arise and flourish are not logical, but as inconsequential, haphazard and inconsistent as the folk who made them. Any mode of expression may thrive quite out of proportion to its good sense, and good manners often will demand the use and retention of an idiom which in itself may be neither fit nor happy.

The word *nasty* offers a direct contrast to *bloody* in the reversion of the facts. The former is used in England in a sense by no means so offensive as is true of its use in the United States. An Englishman would say an article of food is *nasty,* and intend to signify merely that it was not nice, where an American would confine such a remark to what was actually tainted and disgusting. The late Matthew Arnold is credited with having described the food in a private American house by that adjective, to the distress of the guests.

In short, it is true that any word agreed upon by the tribe as good or bad in its implication becomes so in common use, irrespective of its surface or obvious signification. An esoteric inner meaning

is imparted by this understood compact. Hence, pass-words, of which the Old Testament *shibboleth* is a notable example. The Gileadites, it will be remembered, pronounced the word giving a certain value to the *th* sound in the word. And by the way the fugitive Ephraimites failed to give the sound did they detect them at the passes of the Jordan River (Judges xii). Similarly, all the pass-words in the world lend some secret esoteric value to a word, sentence or phrase for the benefit of the initiate. It is a use of language which gives overtones and double meanings to the apparent face-meaning of the words.

Thus, a clan word becomes for the clan a sort of cement that binds together the members of the clan as against the outside world. Slang of the moment continually illustrates this rather curious principle. "I should worry," which as a statement means exactly the opposite to what it appears to mean, is one such. This particular and seemingly foolish idiom is to be explained probably as of Yiddish origin, and in derivation wresting the negative idea from the English words by an odd twist from a foreign tongue. But such an expression as "I don't think," with the meaning "I *do* think," apparently can only be justified on the assumption of a private understanding between one who uses and

one who receives it that a negative shall become an affirmative. It's as if one said to the other: "Let's have some private fun between ourselves by really meaning yes, when we say no." Always words in current use, words sure to be but of the moment, have a vogue only because in this way they have a meaning or implication by a sort of underground agreement. *Applesauce,* as an exclamation will at present get a laugh in the theater in certain connections, only to be explained by this fact. A word like *blah* possibly owes its existence to a sound that imitates the sense, yet one's instinct assures one of its brief tenure. And so forth with hundreds of coinages which amuse for the moment, but are not well enough founded to insure long life. Local color has much to do with it, and the jaded wish for a new thing to crowd out some elder use.

Changed manners in English are brought about in two main ways. Time produces the change, so that a word or phrase of the eighteenth century, if it lasts until the twentieth, radically alters in meaning; or separation, not in time but in space, makes the same alteration. For instance, Pepys in his famous diary has an entry to the effect that going to her dressing-room one night, he found Nell Gwynne "all unready." The diarist intended to convey the idea that the actress was completely disrobed, but

one innocent of historical English might on reading the words naturally and innocently ask: "Unready for *what?*" Or take an example covering a wider sweep of time. To us to-day a man of worth is a man whose solid traits of character we would point out; but to Chaucer, a man of worth was a man of property, nothing else, and only to be respected to the degree in which one worshiped money. In the good old phrase, "your worship," as a form of address, preserved in the law courts even to the present day, we get a variant of the same thing. Historically, *worship* in that title does not mean that the person thus addressed is worthy of worship but that he is a man of worth, worth originally being a word to signify worldly property, a man of worship then being a rich man. The spiritual implications of such words and phrases came gradually to give them higher significance.

What separation in locality or habitat does in the way of changing the signification of words is well illustrated by the respective English and Yankee color given to the familiar word *clever*. Clever to an Englishman means well equipped mentally or able in his work; but to the Yankee it has the implication of sharp, astute at a bargain, with a more or less humorous suggestion that the man is a hard one to beat. Even in this country there is some confusion

in its use, both British and American meanings sometimes blending so as to make the uncertainty of significance.

Manners and modes in English use are as inevitable as they are in social etiquette, and, as long as they do not run into what is silly, meaningless or vulgar, are to be accepted as the way of language. But when a manner becomes a mannerism, then we get the abuse of a thing which may be all right perhaps in itself. This is constantly happening when some word or idiom, innocent in itself, or even good, is overused to an extent that the once blameless bit of vernacular becomes common and stale, and at last all but intolerable. This applies to such an expression as "along these lines," and countless more. When first heard, this phrase, while certainly not more than a convenient commercial turn of words, could be let go without adverse comment. But it has long since been so hackneyed by repetition as to have become a public nuisance which should be forbidden by law. Yet distinguished political leaders still round out the sentence with it, and in commercial circles it is steadily used, because a lazy mental habit turns to it as a convenience. Let it be said aphoristically that it stands for the truth that a manner of speech, abused, becomes a mannerism. And if one watches the speech uses of people in

general one can derive a great deal of amusement from the frequency with which human beings in the rapid unconscious formation of words in conversation will repeat a phrase until a humorous effect is the result of the repetition. Novelists or dramatists secure fun from dialogue larded with these unwitting redundancies and pleonasms. Think, if you can, of the difference between hearing for the first time such a sentence as, "If you know what I mean," and the effect produced to-day when for the millionth time it assails your long-suffering ears. It well illustrates how manner of speech may pass over into an objectionable mannerism.

I referred to *proposition* as another instance of a commercial use so terribly overdone as to produce nausea, especially as it creeps far too much into the social area. Again, it indicates a feeble power in word choice, the mental laziness referred to which is unable or unwilling to create a substitute for the idea. A paucity of vocabulary, by the way, always hints at a limited exercise of the gray matter, and can by no means be charged entirely to the lack of education.

Sometimes a mannerism is such not only because of repetition, but because it is ludicrously ill adjusted to the occasion or demand of accuracy. I notice sundry young women incline to say something

is *precious,* when what they mean is simply that it is very nice, or of some value to them. I imagine *precious* is past its meridian of popularity, but it surely had a vigorous day and was always rather misplaced and foolish, for the reason that it had a mawkishly esthetic sound reminiscent of Bunthorne, and stamping the user as a poseur, whether or no such were the case. Yet now and then a similar expression, though not the same, is still used by a person of authority and dignity, as when the Earl of Oxford in his current *Memories and Reflections,* speaking of the conversation of Winston Churchill, says: "Some of his unpremeditated phrases were quite priceless." But this is the exception that proves the rule.

No doubt, to be modish in language (as in other things) is one of the dear desires of the human heart. An infinite amount of heart burnings, of asinine exhibitions and of exposures of ignorance can be charged up to this account. Among them, and prominent, are the silly attempts to interlard honest English expression with scraps of quotation from some foreign tongue, first and foremost in this cheap parade of pseudo-learning being French. Not often, to be sure, is it carried to the absurd length of the western lady who signed herself on a hotel register as "Mrs. Jones, née Chicago."

This laughable weakness is carried over into the humor column in the story of a Miss Pants who, having married a Mr. Knickerbocker, was referred to facetiously by her friends as Mrs. Knickerbocker, née Pants.

But we are all familiar with the overuse of French in a way plainly to signify the user's wish to prove the acquirement of sufficient of the speech of diplomacy and society to be able to air it with success. Of course, there are times when the use of some French phrase, aptly introduced, and (which is important) expressing a shade of thought impossible to convey in English, is legitimate, even desirable—if done in moderation. It will then imply a nice sense of the contrasted idioms, and have an effect of giving variety, extension and spice to one's style or manner of expression. But the cheaper exhibitions of it so common with writers of second-class or worse quality, or similar spectacles where one ill equipped to do it endeavers to be quite *comme if faut,*—as such a person herself would say,—make pity struggle with condemnation as we read or listen.

There is one trait surely characterizing any speech that is modish: its transiency. The penalty of being very smart and of the moment in one's language as in one's dress, is the short duration of

its vogue. When to being smart is added being slangy with slang of the day's cheaper use, you run a double chance of oblivion. While this is being written the democratic candidate for the presidency has given a certain notoriety to the vulgar expression, "a lot of Bologny." Soberly, this is a newism meaning, "that's all nonsense." But it is quite safe to say that any extra prominence awarded to a locution so evidently of the East Side will not prevent the sure fate that awaits it as one of so many born to blush but briefly before it be consigned to the dust. An expression to be fashionable with the polite or popular with the polloi must be better founded in the needs and linguistic instincts of those who use it. Any one then who would be modish in the use of language must run the risk of ephemerality. Words persist inversely as the square of their distance from the merely butterfly life that gives a new thing value not because of fitness but newness. To have an infallible flair for what is fashionable in speech one must be truly educated in language and, in the final testing, to be well mannered is to be, linguistically speaking, well trained.

Good taste is often referred to as if it were something finicky. But in the long run good taste wins as surely in language as it does in personal conduct or deportment. Even those who affect to

flaunt it secretly admire it and pay it the compliment, in their inspired moments, of imitation. Thus a study of modes and manners of English use only emphasizes the truth that the new must always look to the old for countenance and authority, although the old must, in its time, give way gracefully to the new, since mankind will always freshen its enjoyment in the making and handling of language by introducing younger expressions than exist at the moment: similes, idioms, phrases, words, turns of speech that add piquancy to our daily contacts with language. There is always a thrill at a new birth. It applies to this matter of speech, even as it does to maternity.

CHAPTER XII

STYLE IN SPEECH

If asked, "What makes elegant diction?" perhaps the majority would reply without hesitation: "The right and happy selection and arrangement of words." Nor would this miss the mark, by a long shot. Nevertheless, in that totality of effect which, when we listen to some one manipulating the mother-tongue, results in an impression good or bad, other elements come in more likely to be overlooked, yet potent in that effect. It is not alone the wise selection of the words spoken, nor their artistic grouping in a succession of sentences, valuable as those things may be, which makes us know that the person thus handling speech has breeding, charm, power to please and convince. Such other things as pronunciation, intonation, modulation are surely factors in the admirable result. Speech tune, as it has been happily called, enters into the matter. It is not only what the speaker does, but also how it is

done, that settles the question of success. When we consider style in speech, these aspects of the somewhat complex problem are too often overlooked or at least minimized. Dilation upon it is advisable, just because of this overlooking. The fact that it is thus side-tracked in the main can be illustrated by pointing to the small attention—more likely no attention at all—paid to the oral side of English in our public-school system. Only of late is a recognition of the vast value of speaking correctly on the side of voice culture seeping into our school grades. That value can be called a social asset quite as much as an educational and cultural one.

Let the statement be illustrated. Somebody, man or woman, enters a room. At once if such person be a stranger, you begin to make up your mind concerning the newcomer, to get an impression and take sides for or against. This is a universal experience. An absolutely neutral impression is never made. What are the elements entering into this quick definite judgment? They are many. Among them, and possibly dominant, is, of course, the effect of face and form. Carriage is an important element, carriage assisted by dress. As soon as a personal relation is set up, other things come into the picture: deportment and speech. And I believe that in the total effect made upon any one

coming thus into contact with a hitherto unknown individual, no asset of them all goes further and is more effective in turning the tide in favor of the person on view, than the possession of a well-modulated, gentle and musical voice. That, and a diction befitting such an instrument, can be placed high indeed among those attributes which instantly win regard, notice and liking for anybody on earth running the gauntlet of new acquaintance. It is true of both sexes, and especially true of woman. No wonder Shakespeare spoke of a voice as that "excellent thing in woman." But it is desirable in men, too: a commercial man on the road can sell more goods by possessing it; and, more obviously, to the singer, clergyman, lecturer, professor, orator and actor it is a *vade mecum* on his life's journey.

The assumption that the modish and attractive gowning of a woman is not in its aimed-at result half ruined when the woman thus garbed opens her lips and a raucous, shrill, nasal, thin dissonance of sound issues therefrom, is a false one. I have seen countless pretty girls, charming as long as they kept their mouths shut, who utterly spoiled the effect when they began to speak. Yet we go on blandly, or have mostly up to the present in our schools, paying no attention to voice training, but putting our last cent on the education of those whose use of the vocal

apparatus undoes it all. I verily believe more than one home has been broken up by the dreadful cumulative effect of a hideous voice sounding ever about the house. I know a clergyman of character, culture and fine pulpit power, who lost his job simply because his congregation, after listening to his voice for seventeen years, declared they could endure it no longer. And the sad part of it is that training, the earlier the better, can (short of actual vocal defects of nature) remove all traces of cacophony.

Nobody need have an unpleasant voice, if caught early enough. It is always the result of carelessness, lack of perceiving what is bad, insensitiveness to vocal beauty, neglect educationally, together with an environment in which there is no recognition whatever of good vocalics as an ideal. We are coming in these latter days to get a new chance to observe careful, pleasing speech from the radio announcers. It is an encouraging sign that our American Academy, which annually awards a gold medal to some distinguished exponent of effective, cultured speech, and so far has given it to leading actors, will for the present year (1928-29) give it to that announcer who best exemplifies his power of using his medium, the voice, in the finest, most effective fashion. It is exactly the recognition of the oral side of English, drawing attention to the way the tongue is handled

in the details of pronunciation and modulation, which we need, to spread the news of the importance of this aspect of English use.

We may as well eat humble pie and acknowledge that if two specimens of the most cultured expression of English in this aspect were placed side by side, one English, the other American, the prize would go to the former. Given the same amount of education and the higher social contacts, the speech of representatives of the United States will in such a contest be below the British exhibition in those qualities of accent, intonation and speech tune which combine to give an effect of ease, elegance and breeding. However unpleasant to our ears, this is the truth. Cockney English of the lower classes in London, and the many dialectical variations from the best speech of society there, are horrid enough, be it confessed. But when it comes to the best, on the side of oral English, we have to yield the palm to our kinsfolk oversea. The public speaking of England, compared with what assails our ears too often in our House and Senate in Washington, or is heard from the leading pulpits, from political hustings in general, or frequently in educational circles supposed to stand for select utterance, is definitely superior to our own, and especially on this matter of a clear-cut, refined and trained way of

speaking the language. I am not for a moment suggesting that we substitute the speech tunes of England for what is natural to us in the United States. They differ, and always will. The English fashion of saying such a simple phrase as, "What are you doing to-morrow?" with its rise at the end to indicate inquiry, set over against the more leveled tune of an American speaking the same words, may not be in itself better—though it is certainly livelier. But in any such simple sentence, spoken by one hailing from the British Isles, there is more breeding and beauty; a way of talking, as it comes to the ear, testifying that people of the finer environment have long been doing it. Such English (always thinking of the way it sounds) has, in a word, more style. When it comes to the language itself, word use and arrangement, I do not think this so in an equal degree. That side of it has been discussed elsewhere. It is only when we fix our attention on the way the language *sounds* in the mouth of a member of the English nation that the distinction holds. To put it another way: there is less of a gap between the speech heard from the best American type and that of the middle and lower classes than that which yawns between the spoken words of English patricians and those of the lower orders in England.

Does this seem an unsavory knuckling to our

assumed betters? The general treatment and view in this book is sufficient answer. I have been at pains to show that often the American way of speech in this or that aspect of it, is to be preferred to the British. Just here I am considering but one aspect of English culture, that which has to do with the spoken word. When it comes to the use of words, spoken or written, with their selection and arrangement in idioms inherited from our linguistic past, and modified or adapted to modern manipulation, I have made the point that our fashion in language is often sound and to be clung to, against whatever shallow opposition. But we have reason, frankly, to hang our diminished heads when it is a question of voice quality and the vocalization of speech. To be satisfied with what is, is supinely to accept a standard below the highest.

There is a temptation to impute the blame for this unhappy fate of the spoken word in this country to the vagaries of climate, in a land so vast, with such changeful contrasts as make a severe strain on the vocal organs, producing the nasality of New England, the flat intonations or soft blurrings of different parts of the South, to say nothing of the negroid influence. Also one hears in defense the democratic notion that we as Americans freely circulate among all classes, far more than do the

British, with a resultant vocal corruption. There is a modicum of truth in both explanations. But the main cause does not lie here, and it were better, looking to reform and improvement, to place the fault where it belongs: on carelessness of training, or its entire lack, a failure to recognize the paramount importance of the subject, and to perceive that, in the march of civilization and the aspiration to do our bit toward it, nothing stands more clearly as proof of progress than the cultivated use of the human voice in all the exchanges of language.

It is my firm conviction, after a generation of practical experience in our educational institutions, that the only sure method of correction is to begin at the bottom, in the school (since the home is to-day a most uncertain factor), and teach not only grammar, with its negative system of implanting a series of linguistic *don'ts,* but as well to inculcate elegant speech, speech of the "center," as Matthew Arnold called it, speech listened to by the pupils as it is spoken by teachers who have other credentials besides securing by hook or crook the necessary "credits" from a normal school, in order that they may perpetrate upon any and all the cacophonous hideousness of their voices and the slovenly accents that bespeak their unfortunate early environment. When we find parents attending to this business of the right

use of the voice almost from infancy, making nurses reproach their charges when the young voice is misused as is now so common; and also find such parents selecting a school largely because of the importance of voice culture and the right handling of words, for the ear quite as much as for the eye, then we shall have progressed beyond the present woeful spectacle. It will then not be possible for a leading educator at one of the great meetings of a national organization to refer to "that public misfortune, the American voice." To call this view hypercritical is to dodge facts and to fall back on the false optimism which is one of the main blocks to advancement. To call it unpatriotic is a pitiful perversion of a noble word, once referred to by Samuel Johnson as "the last refuge of scoundrels." The true patriot is he, who, loving his land, strives for love's sake to correct its faults and make it nearer to the beau ideal of his dream.

In every walk and way of life we are all ruled, in a sense, by fashion. Let us be frank and acknowledge it. But when we use the word, we think first of all, perhaps, of dress—particularly woman's garb. A woman not in the style, is a woman in the outer darkness. The "smart" woman is the woman in style, the discrimination of the subtle change that marks the difference between this year's style and

last's—or worse, year before last's—being the special feminine prerogative, beyond most male comprehension. The women know—and the men pay,—or did, before economic equality of the sexes began to alter the picture a little.

Apply the thought to our theme. Style in language is just as true, and far more an asset of genuine civilization, as any mode of dress whatever. When this is realized, when we can justly call somebody's speech stylish, in the sense in which the subject has here been touched on, then we shall have conquered. For fashion rules supreme. The compulsions of religion are secondary to its tyrannous sway, and even home-ties give way before it. Crudeness in dress is either pitied or ridiculed. It lays the wearer open to the terrible scorn of the better-dressed. Let it be early implanted through education that, similarly, the user of unstylish speech must run the gauntlet of like laughter and ridicule.

To make inelegant utterance for a lady in the mode as unstylish as it would be to have the dress at the leg-line an inch too long, would solve the problem—as far as women are concerned. And men, here as elsewhere, would humbly practise imitation.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RIGHT PLACING OF WORDS

PROPERLY enough, in considering the right handling of language, we stress the selection of our words and the widening of our vocabulary, to the end that our selection may be more varied and interesting. But another consideration, more likely to be overlooked, of very decided importance in the result, is such placing of the words at our command as shall impart to them a fresh and perhaps unexpected value. The new coinage is always emphasized as invigorating speech, giving it piquancy and individuality, and this, too, is true. A new occasion often demands and gets its new word or phrase, and sometimes a permanent enrichment of the tongue ensues. How much was added, not alone for the time but ever since, to English by the adoption in Cleveland's day of that sturdy word *mugwump!*

But we are more likely to miss the fact that often an effect of freshness and enjoyment may be

secured in the use of English by the insertion of a perfectly familiar word, long so set in the sentence that when we hear or see it, we at once think of the companion words surrounding it, in such wise as to make it gleam new and unwonted because of its fresh setting. For example, when we say *green grass,* we are using a phrase very obvious and commonplace, because the most evident thing about grass is its greenness and, as a result, that association of the two words has been in use a long, long time, as the line from the old song,

"And the green grass growing all around, all around,"

serves to remind us. But when we speak of *green eyes* we freshen up the use of green a little, for the reason that although green eyes are not unknown, they are less common than green grass. But when an author speaks of a character falling into a *green rage,* he introduces an element of novelty because, while the two words are as familiar as can be, the collocation of the two, placed together perhaps for the first time, is so unusual that the effect is almost as striking as if an utterly unheard-of word had made its virgin bow.

Let some further illustrations be given. The word *meandering,* in such a phrase as "the meander-

ing stream," is well enough known to attract no particular attention. But when Browning in his charming poem, *Naming the Flower,* wishes to describe a certain Spanish flower he saw when he walked in a garden with his sweetheart, and writes of

"its soft, meandering Spanish name,"

the mere unwontedness of the word-setting given this not overly pleasing adjective, with its rather mawkish eighteenth-century associations, suddenly imparts to it a high degree of novelty and poetry. Many a lover of Browning, like myself, must have lingered happily over the effect of *meandering* in that line. It exquisitely limns the nature of the long-drawn-out, lazy yet sweetly syllabled Spanish vocable the poet has in mind.

Robert Louis Stevenson was a past-master in his use of words which however familiar, in the manner described, are made to glow of a sudden, by being wrested from their usual setting to be used in such juxtaposition with other words as to produce a startled sense of felicity, and also to remind the reader of those root flavors of words gradually dimmed by constant repetition. When, in *Kidnapped,* he makes a character say, "I swim like a stone," he uses as homely, simple words as the tongue contains.

Yet, there is an effect of freshness, because *stone* as applied to *swimming* is about the last one would think of—yet it is seen instantly as most happily descriptive. Thus again, in the opening line of the verse to his friend, Will H. Low, he writes:

> "Youth now flees on feathered foot,"

and *feathered* strikes the imagination as unusual in such a connection and hence effective though in itself it is commonplace. In the justly well-liked poem "Good Night," in the inimitable *Child's Garden of Verses,* the following famous quatrain furnishes another illustration:

> "Must we to bed indeed? Well then,
> Let us arise and go like men,
> And face with an undaunted tread
> The long black passage up to bed."

Undaunted, a word not unfamiliar, gains immensely by its qualifying of tread, since one does not think of *tread* as dauntless, more commonly associating it with the heart or some other word that typifies the whole personality, not a physical characteristic like *tread.* Often Stevenson, cunning artist as he was, loving the sounds, flavors, subtle implications of the words that were the tools of his

beautiful craft, will startle us by seizing on a noun or adjective that has concreteness, the color of mother-earth about it, and using it to stand for an abstraction, as where he speaks of "the ruddy days of my youth."

All literature in the English tongue is filled with these happy instances of effects of novelty secured not by new coinages, but by a new placing of older words, refurbishing, as it were, a worn coin until it sparkles anew. Thus Wordsworth, telling of his impression of the statue of Newton, the scientist, at Cambridge, speaks of

". . . his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind forever
Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone."

Marble, when you come to think of it, is associated in our minds with other mediums than the face Wordsworth here gazed upon, and so he gets an original bit of color, although all the words used are simple and well known.

Mark Twain, indubitably one of the most gifted handlers of English speech to be found anywhere in English-speaking Letters, whether British or American, often exhibits this power of vivifying words, not so much by invention of new idioms, though he does that as well, but through this un-

expected placing of words beside brother words with which they seem not acquainted. In that masterpiece, *The Prince and the Pauper,* occurs the following:

> "The shining pageant still went winding like a radiant and interminable serpent down the crooked lanes of the quaint old city."

It is safe to say that no one before him ever joined *interminable* to *serpent.* Or, to cite one case from a book absolutely current (I write in the autumn of 1928), in Donn Byrne's posthumous, beautiful book of stories called *Destiny Bay* (which would once have been called *The Bay of Destiny,* to its loss), I find it said of a blackbird that he stood on "inadequate yellow feet." Here we find the unusualness of *inadequate* in such a connection thrown up the more strikingly by the usualness of yellow. The same writer in the same book gets a similar effect in exactly a similar way when he describes a character as having "grey granite eyes."

Throughout our Letters examples are rife of the way in which writers, desiring to make their style unhackneyed by all legitimate devices, have fastened upon this device as one of them. And it should be added that this particular way of securing fresh, happy effects, proving originality in those using

them, escapes a criticism often directed against another way of so gaining attention and imparting pleasure: that of the new, startling and rare-met coinages and creations of language which have to challenge acceptance because they are new, and need time to be domesticated in the tongue.

Words, then, are not only beautiful and effective in themselves, but often equally so because of their place in a sentence and their relation to other words.

Masters of speech, great stylists, those who breathe new qualities into speech uses, are the very writers who know the value of this right placing of words through their unhackneyed use, although in themselves they are familiar and even stale. And it may be noted in respect of this form of creative writing that an author sensitive to its advantage does not weaken his effect by an overabundant use of adjectives, if they be the qualifier of the noun, or of nouns, if it happen that substantives are involved. To use several adjectives, when the felicity depends on the single effect of the unwonted placing of a descriptive word where it will do most good, is to dissipate energy and lessen impact. A man is known by the adjectives he uses, and the loose-jointed style of a writer like Walter Scott is due in large measure to his habit of diluting his natural vigor and picturesqueness by the use of three at-

tributes of a noun, where one was so much better. If one would see the difference between the carelessness of one great writer and the beautiful care of another, let him compare the adjectival use of Scott and that of Conrad in our own day. The former too often will repeat words to carry the music of his movement, using those that add nothing to the idea of the first one used; while Conrad, prodigal of their use, nevertheless continually adds color, meaning and variety by his deft choosing of the qualifying words, thus building up his effects to a climax even as mountain peaks repeat the sky-line yet are never the same. It is only the master who, by the selection of his descriptive words, adds color to his style and enriches the movement of his sentences, while at the same time enlarging the mental concepts that belong to his subject-matter.

The right placing of words also includes the avoidance of anticlimaxes, the result of a misplaced word, phrase or clause. Many a sentence well begun peters out because of this kind of carelessness. Knowing when a climax of effect is reached and knowing therefore when to stop,—this is one of the secrets of the art literary, and sinners against it are like leaves on Vallombrosa for number. A knowledge of the place of emphasis, or what is just as well, an instinct for it, is one of the virtues of a

first-class writer rating high in the category of his excellencies. It has been said that upon his nouns and adjectives depends the stylistic effect secured by any author. The statement will bear modification perhaps, but there is much truth in it. In the too subtle performances of latter-day authors it may be said that style often runs to qualifiers that remove the forthright impression conveyed by straight noun or adjective use. There is something solid and satisfying in such use, and the clear-cut impression that results gives the same sense of comprehending what is meant as is conveyed by the sharp outlines of clouds on a bright day after rain. Nuances, delicate shadings into the blue are absent, be it granted; but crisp definition affords a pleasure not to be gainsaid. It may be recognized that the everlasting adverbial or subordinate clause modifiers of our stylistic day have their merit and add something to literary feats; yet it can never be denied that a certain loss in clarity and force goes with whatever is gained in flexibility when the modern writer substitutes acrobatics for swift sailing toward a goal to be descried by the naked eye. It may be declared, as a generalization, that what chiefly characterizes present style among the confessed leaders of literature is an exaggerated tendency to subtleties and overtones that, like a lacquer, however beautiful,

obscures forthright meanings and the making of intelligible points.

It will be well to understand, in considering our own writings or the writings of others, that three main things conjoin to produce a result of happy effective style: an extensive vocabulary, only to be secured by wide reading and listening to talk of the creative kind; a wise selection of words for the purpose in hand; and such sense of idiom as shall dispose of the words by right placing, in order that cogent effects of conviction, persuasion and delight shall be the issue.

CHAPTER XIV

A LITTLE LEARNING IS A DANGEROUS THING

I DOUBT if in any phase of human thought this good old homely adage gets better illustration than in the field of language use. As was stated on an earlier page, debates about speech uses are for ever under way, in the papers, on the street, in the shop, at the home table, or in the formal scholarly discussions of specialists gravely gathered to question or settle linguistic matters. Outside the arguments and wagers aroused by prize-fights or baseball games, I have hardly seen more violence displayed between people than when some query as to spelling, or word use or true meaning of a phrase has come up to disturb the peace. It is really extraordinary how much choler is excited and vehemence manifested over language difficulties you would suppose of interest only to those whose life business it is to understand and explain them to simpler souls.

And in all this pother and ferment there is one

thing the layman never quite grasps. He doesn't realize that a question of language is a special, a learned, question, and that one competent to settle it must have a very definite special training in the field to fit him adequately to give an opinion. That same layman would not dream of opposing a doctor on some technical matter of medicine, nor a lawyer when legal niceties are on the carpet. He knows well enough that he doesn't know, and is willing to keep silent and let his betters (on the subject) tell him the truth. But not so with language. Oh, no; when it comes to a discussion of when to use *don't* or *doesn't,* the layman regards himself as just as good as the next one, if not a little better, and sails right in, laying down the law without fear or favor, and thus exhibiting his absurd ignorance to the few (always the person who knows belongs with the few) able to speak with authority. Thus, debates and arguments on language are commonly a sort of go-as-you-please, and the Devil take the hindmost.

Such being the case, let us bluntly ask ourselves: "What are the tests, if any, by which questions of language can be settled; and who the persons, if any, who should be allowed to settle them?" The test most often appealed to and accepted is that of polite usage. And surely it is a good test, not to be set aside. When in circles where education and cul-

ture most flourish you hear certain accents, pronunciations, choice of words, formation of sentences, you are not off the path to assume that such is the best, the most correct and the happiest English. The best current speech habits are certainly a main way of finding out and a safe guide to those seeking aid.

Just here it must be said that to try too strictly to localize the center of population where this assumed best speech can be heard, is to-day a little dangerous. Once, when Boston not only considered itself, but was, the "hub of the universe" in American culture, that favored town might have been pointed to as the place where the choicest English was to be listened to and noted down. But it is doubtful that such a claim would now be allowed. Neither can New York declare properly that the seat of authority has shifted to her. Many would smile if Chicago put in the claim; Philadelphia might at once remark that she could draw rings around the big middle-western town when culture was in question. And then San Francisco, to say nothing of a dozen other large cities sprinkled all over the land from sea to sea, might well have something to say in the discussion, by this time very lively if not acrimonious.

The truth is that in the gradual dissemination of culture and education up and down the United States

the tyrannous hold of any one city has inevitably relaxed, so that the best handlers of English are to be found (a dignified minority always) in numerous towns where there are found education, breeding, culture, and the resultant power and grace and decorum in speech uses. It will be safer, then, merely to make the general statement and say you will hear and read the best English when you are in company with the best people (in the best sense, not the silly one) wherever found: naturally more of them in the large, highly developed centers than in the smaller towns, hamlets and smaller groupings of American life. Further discussion of the "best English" occurs in a subsequent chapter. Even such places will do well to heed the precautionary remark that all the while isolated groups of rustic folk are being exploited in fiction in their word uses and dialectic variations of speech, and, perhaps to the surprise of many, we are finding that they contribute much that is charming in speech tunes, racy words and idioms inherited from a worthy linguistic past.

But not quite the one and only test is to be found in the preferred current usage. The genius of the tongue, by which, as explained, I mean the natural instinctive way in which English, differentiated from other languages, says a thing, is always at work at making what we call idiom. It has been

working in English for a thousand years, which we can study because we have books transmitted containing this English idiom. And sometimes, here's the important point, that idiom seems to run counter to the current speech use, and when this does happen idiom is more likely than not to be right, and the polite usage has to take a back seat. It works out that way pretty surely, although it may take quite some time to do it. Previous chapters, I trust, will have made this plainer.

I will give one instance from an important aspect of general English use, namely that of pronunciation. Worcester was a lexicographer who stood high up Boston way a generation ago. In his dictionary the word *decórative* (pronounced as I have here marked it) was offered as superior to the then accepted *décorative.* Now that eccentric accenting of the word has passed and for the very good reason that *décorative,* as accepted, was right in that it obeyed the general law governing the pronunciation of English words. That law is known as the law of recessive accent. It means that all words in English, words derived from foreign sources included, tend to place the main accent on an early syllable of the word, and do so in proportion to the time they have been incorporated into English. *Décorative,* for example, accents the first

syllable. That is in consonance with the law. Therefore, when Worcester came along and tried to push the accent on to the second syllable, he was doing something analogous to a man who tries to make water flow up-hill. It can't be done. The accent on the first syllable of *décorative,* once arrived, is there for ever; you can count on it. No dictionary maker can change the genius of the tongue expressed in and by that accent.

I spoke of foreign words being subject to the law. Let me illustrate. I first heard the now familiar word, *cafeteria,* on the Pacific coast years ago. It was then pronounced *cafetería,* because it was a Spanish word taken over into English and given its native pronunciation. But as the word spread to other parts of the land, and the thing it stands for became of general knowledge, we got the now common pronunciation, *cafetéria.* It is always so, I repeat; foreign words slowly accept the English way of saying them.

But it is ever dangerous to put complete confidence in even the best current speech, without the corrective knowledge which has in mind a background of the historical development of English expression through hundreds of years. With such information, one can check up any current usage and see if it does conform to that deep instinct in the

way of saying things harmonious with the genius of the English language. And the worst of it is, very few persons have this orientation equipping them to decide the question upon the basis of two things: current use and idiom with its roots deep in the linguistic past. One illustration may be given: any carpenter would speak of a three-foot measure. But somebody with a conventional school training might well say that that is wrong; *feet* is the plural form, therefore we should say a three-*feet* rule. Yet, it is not such good idiom as to agree with the carpenter and make it a three-*foot*. The explanation takes us back into linguistic history, and as the principle here is an important one, let us tarry a moment to hear it. Far back in time, when an English person wished to say three feet, he said three of feet, the word *fota* being genitive plural. To put it more plainly, the plural form was not *feet* but *foot*. There in a flash you see why to-day the unlearned carpenter, in saying three-*foot* measure, is using an historically correct form, though he is the last man to know it.

And what is true in this case holds true in innumerable others, where, if one is aware of the history behind some current form, light is at once thrown upon some idiom that seems (only *seems*, mind you) to contradict a smug rule of grammar or the convention of some best usage. I don't for a

minute mean to say that the best usage may not come to take precedence over an historical fact. What I am trying to show is that often when grammar, as written by those without historical knowledge, or usage that is regarded as conventionally proper, declares for one use, while people (like my carpenter) with an instinct for sound English idiom, use another, then the idiom based on a hidden historical fact, long in the tongue, may be right.

The statement is worth an illustration. The expression, "I have gotten over it," is historically quite correct. The verb *get* is a strong verb, changing its tense by a change in the vowel, *get* to *got*, and adding the participial *en*. No question about that at all. To-day, in our popular educational mill, *gotten* would be taught and defended still. But if you will watch the best writers, you will find them preferring *got* to *gotten*. Why? Because, in the wearing down of English by constant use, the monosyllabic strength of *got* has come to be valued more than the smoother, fuller form, *gotten*. This is a case, then, in which history gives way to the best custom.

The whole matter becomes confused, and the right and wrong of it puzzling, when, as constantly happens, well-educated folk, but without the special

philological training necessary to say a final word in the premises, blandly assume omniscience and unconsciously exhibit their ignorance. Only a few days ago one of the great New York dailies had an editorial with the caption, "It's Me." The view taken, disagreeing with a Johns Hopkins professor who defended that phrase (discussed in an earlier chapter), showed a total lack of comprehension of the principles involved. Yet doubtless it will be taken as authoritative by almost all the countless thousands of readers. One of the last things to be grasped in the polemics over any such speech use, is that specialists only are thoroughly equipped to settle it. A philologist is a trained specialist in language. But most people will claim he belongs in the classroom and is out of his bailiwick if he goes into society and airs his opinion on a question which laymen (so they fatuously believe) are quite competent to decide for themselves. Word experts, in the popular view, are not like doctors or lawyers in their special fields, and so not a final court of appeal on the moot-points of language. Thorough training is at a discount when half-knowledge is judged just as good. And so the title of this chapter gets its justification; surely a little learning *is* a dangerous thing!

We have at least, then, a sound principle to act

upon in considering the uses of words. We should remember that the best speech comes from the blend of the two influences: the habits of the most cultured, authoritative users of language, as we hear them speaking or writing all about us; and second, the corrective influence of the genius of the tongue, working quietly but potently for centuries, and violated at its peril by any current idiom. Current usage and historical evolution of speech, these two settle it, and never one alone. Errors or trouble of all sorts come only when current usage is exclusively fixed upon to settle a given question arbitrarily; or when past habits and usages of speech are pointed to as the one and only arbiter. The union of the two, let me repeat, is what furnishes the decisive judgment, and constitutes the supreme court. And on that court sit those alone whose wisdom we should trust—as we do the court of highest appeal at Washington. It will be a long day ahead, however, I fear, before such understanding of Who's Who in language has permeated to the general intelligence.

Meanwhile it is perhaps too much to ask people in general to have a full instead of a little learning in this business of language. We use English to get about our business, and if now and then we misuse it, it is not a matter to lie awake about. But at least we can do two things: believe that the

specially trained know more about it than we do, and next, try to be ambitious to enlarge our vocabulary and widen our contacts with literature, so that, even if unconsciously, we may come to some understanding and appreciation of the glories, the beauties and the powers of one of the dominant tongues spoken from the mouth and to the ear and eye of man. And so developed, this will lead to a personal pride in it as a gift not to be debased.

CHAPTER XV

SOME MISTAKEN USES

English at one time was what is called an inflectional tongue. That merely means that to show the interrelations of words, the words were inflected, using cases like the nominative and accusative, and more or less changing the form of the words themselves. Singular and plural, for example, were indicated by a change represented by *ox* and *oxen*. In the phrase, "my brother's wife," meaning the wife of my brother, *brother* would be put in the genitive case, and show a change accordingly. English once was one of a family of languages called the Germanic of which the modern German, the Dutch and the Scandinavian group, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish, are fellow members. But unlike German (to illustrate by one related tongue), English has very largely given up this inflectional method of indicating these interrelations of words, and has become what is called an analytic tongue,

which again means that these relations to each other are shown, not so much by changes in the words themselves, but by their place in the sentence. This is why English now differs so much from German.

I said the inflectional method had been largely given up in English; but, let it be added, not entirely. And that is the reason why, in modern speech as we now use it and are developing it, certain forms and ways of speaking are puzzling, and make hot debates every day as to what is right or wrong. This chapter proposes to take a few of them, to illustrate the passage of English from an inflectional to an analytic language. Often, the moot-point is very practical and interesting, for it amounts to a question of good or bad English to-day, and if we care at all for the excellence of our personal speech, or for the preservation of good speech in literary expression, we feel that considerable is at stake. Such questions, be it added, can only be settled on the basis of these historical facts. However nice our taste in language use, we can not appeal to our mere instinct for what is right, where knowledge is needed to supplement instinct, in order that the debatable point may really be argued with intelligence and settled by proof.

Let us take the expression, "If I were you," as one that has come into the region of debate, and that

rests on the historical facts referred to. Plenty of people, lacking school training, say, "If I was you." Even some scholars, observing the tendency of English to give up the inflectional method, declare that the use of *was* in the conditional mood of the verb is in keeping with that general tendency and hence will conquer soon, so that we might as well adopt it. My English professor in college, a generation ago, told the class it would surely come. And Brander Matthews, a great many years ago, said substantially the same thing, his opinion being one to listen to, decidedly. Yet, I think most educated folk will agree with me that *were* instead of *was* to express the conditional, or subjunctive, is still preferred and widely used. We call it a subjunctive to indicate that some following clause depends upon it, is sub-joined to it. Originally, the whole verb was inflected, and *were* indicates we have here hung on to the original inflectional habit. We have got rid of many such inflections, but this one is a hang-over that all who care at all for the niceties of English expression have fondly preserved. To a trained ear, "If I were you" sounds far better than "If I was you." And it may be hoped this will long continue to be so, though there is plenty of analogy to provide the argument that in the end it, too, like other such retentions, will disappear. The

point is, it has *not* disappeared to-day, and therefore it is more correct, more refined and civilized English to use it.

But when you come to such a distinction as is represented by the two words *shall* and *will,* you enter more debatable ground, and have to make closer distinctions and subtler considerations. When is it proper to say, "I shall go," and when, "I will go"? What is the difference, if any, in your meaning as you make use of one or the other of these phrases? The scholar will reply: by "I shall go," you mean to express futurity; the words imply that, sometime in the future, you *will* go. And that "I will go" means an expression of your intention to go; it is an assertion of the will, the volitional statement of your purpose. This distinction is perfectly sound historically; such is just the difference English has meant to convey, as the phrase has been used these many centuries. But there are signs that gradually this distinction between *shall* and *will* is to disappear, for it already is being blurred in daily use. I observe that in newspaper English (at least on the reportorial side) it is commonly confused. An American man of Letters of good standing, the late Richard Harding Davis, who started as a newspaper man and got his early training as a writer in that field, frequently failed to distinguish *shall* from

will in his short stories: a fact all the more significant in that he had excellent idiomatic resources at his command. The Scotch confuse the two and even a standard author like Stevenson reveals this tendency to mix the two forms. William Dean Howells, then editor of the magazine mentioned, writing to James Russell Lowell in 1879, says: "It vexes me to have you so long absent from *The Atlantic*. If you can, pray stretch a point in favor of the first inspiration. I will do my best for the *shalls* and *wills*. You know I am not native to the right use of them; but heaven has befriended me in much grammar hitherto, and I don't despair." This seems to show plainly two things: that Lowell had earlier complained of the mishandling of his own use, perhaps by proof-readers; and also that Howells recognized that Lowell preserved the delicate distinction better than he himself. This becomes the truer, because the difficulty grows greater, when the conditional *shall* and *will*, namely *should* and *would*, are considered. To distinguish between the two to-day is as delicate and difficult a test as can be propounded. A generation or two ago, let us say when Lowell or a contemporary of his, was active, there is evidenced a clear feeling for the distinction between *should* and *would*. But, frankly, many cultivated and sensitive handlers of English would be baffled at present

to discriminate and get the fine subtle color which separates the two sentences: "I should much prefer to go," and, "I would much prefer to go." Some ears, to be sure, delicately attuned to shades of meaning, may still be able to distinguish the difference, once plainly existing, between such a variant of usage, according to a shift of attitude and intention on the part of the speaker or writer. But surely not the majority, even of those with the advantage of education. Nevertheless, one of the ways to detect a really first-class writer, in the twentieth century, is to find him conscious of these subtler distinctions, and illustrating them in his work.

A fine example of the danger of half-education in this matter of English use is furnished by the schoolma'am attempt to foist on the public as correct the idiom *would better,* in place of the historic and entirely right *had better.* The mistake lies in analyzing the use from a purely modern attitude, with no corrective knowledge of the background facts, in this way. To say, "You had better go," is nonsense, an equivalent to saying, "You had go better," implying, "than something-or-other," which is omitted but understood. Of course this is absurd, having no meaning. Whereas, "You would better go," has some sense to it; it can be taken to read, "You would better go than not go."

The trouble with this plausible statement (and hundreds of others based on an equally shallow training in the field) is that it quite overlooks the fact that in the phrase, *had better,* which has steadily been the Anglo-Saxon way of expressing that thought since the beginning of our language, the *had* has been retained because it once was an independent verb, not the pale auxiliary it has since become; it possessed a forceful meaning in itself, which explains why it has weathered the lingustic storms of centuries, and remains excellent idiom to-day, the preferred form for all with a feeling for idiom in their bones.

Originally, the verb *to have* meant to kill, to possess by killing; it roots, you observe, in the primitive life of the race. The moment this is grasped, the key is furnished for the understanding of such an idiom as *had better.* The principle involved might be set to the music of Gilbert's line, "Things are seldom what they seem,"—which is as true in philology as in any other department of human knowledge. But, of course, the average schoolteacher, totally unaware of the historical principles lying behind the present use, takes the phrase at its present face value and gleefully shows its foolishness, thus leading children in their care into the way they should not go. This false instruction will go on exactly as long as we allow our teachers in the public

schools to be uninstructed in English regarded as an unfolding instrument of expression, not a thing to be studied as if it were static and of a certain year of grace. Meanwhile, serenely indifferent to the little pother, sound writers will go right on using the truly idiomatic form and the only one, *had better.*

Another false and silly notion wrongly introduced into English speech because of Latin influence, and of classic studies in general, and also perhaps by the analogy with a language like German, is that which declares that a sentence should not be concluded with a preposition. You should write, "The man of whom I speak," rather than, "The man I speak of." It is no less than astounding that such a statement should have got into English grammars, since it is in complete contradiction to the standard English custom and is violated through the centuries by the best writers, the people from whom, if from anybody, we derive our knowledge of idiom.

The natural and right way to express the above thought in English is with a prepositional ending. "The man I am talking about" is infinitely better English than "The man of whom I am talking," as should be apparent to all familiar with good speech, listening to the two forms. Yet legions of

our young folk will leave school having firmly implanted in their heads, and alas their use, that for reasons beyond their ken, the more elegant, dressy, scholar-like way of saying it is, "The man of whom I am talking,"—no matter how strongly their instincts, bless them, tell them it is unnatural and forced. The former is idiom, the other false-literary. The most efficacious way of getting rid of such foolishness is to ask the person subjected to false training to read Shakespeare, the Bible, Bunyan and other classics, to see how on every page the principle of ending a sentence with a preposition is put into practise.

But, what will you? The erroneous teaching will go on, the *of-whom* form will flourish, until all teachers are trained to know that an illegitimate application of an idiom not our own has been superimposed on English from the days when foreign tongues exercised a tyrannous power over our language, although they belonged to a quite different speech family, in constructions, locutions, principles, having nothing to do with the Germanic group of which English is a member. But while this bit of knowledge percolates through the brain fissures, however long the time, really good writers will remain true to their natural feeling for English expression and put the preposition at the end of the

sentence, only departing from the act in those instances where they feel that the other manner of expression aids the music of their marshaled words. I recall with glee an old school mistress of mine who solemnly informed her plastic little flock: "Remember, a preposition is a wrong word to end a sentence *with*,"—thereby advertising that her principles were inferior to her natural aptitude in English.

Another much discussed use, always good for an argument more or less heated, is that of the so-called split infinitive. Here again, the teaching commonly heard is misleading, not to say flatly wrong. The idea that one should not separate the verb and its copula by the intrusion of an adverb is hard to eradicate from the breast of grammarians, although contrary facts stare them in the face. The authoritative writers from the ninth century to the present day have consistently split their infinitive when they desired to include the adverbial color in the verb's meaning; it ought to be obvious, one would think, that "to thoroughly explore" conveys a somewhat different flavor from "thoroughly to explore." All the Germanic tongues, of which English is one, have thus compounded their verbs with adverbs in the wish to enrich the meaning. Moreover, from the earliest literary monuments we possess, it has been freely exercised as a right, a legitimate device to make the

speech more plastic in expression. Nevertheless, pupils are still being taught the iron-clad rule that an infinitive no more should be split than a teacher should be disputed in an assertion. There are cases, beyond question, when a better effect is secured by the omission of the adverbial insertion. But just as surely, there are other instances where the unit of thought aimed at can only be attained by splitting the verb. The two underlying facts are, then, that the whole group of languages to which English belongs has *always* split its infinitives, and next, that the foremost writers of the English race (as a natural consequence of the former fact) have steadily done so, are still doing so, and will continue so to do until the crack of doom, whatever sciolists teach and preach. Take any truly sound author you like, and you will find him doing it. Nobody writes more idiomatically in our day than Bernard Shaw. Here is a sentence from his latest book: "The wage workers are as fond of flattery as other people, and will swallow any quantity of it from candidates, provided it *be thoroughly understood* that it is only flattery." The decision in any juncture when a choice is to be made between to split or not to split, rests entirely upon what you intend to convey. The principles of your native tongue allow you either use.

Space may be taken before the chapter closes for one more illustration of uses which produce trouble and misunderstanding in the handling of speech. Confusion often arises because of the failure to distinguish between a preposition and a conjunction. Not seldom the same word may be either one or the other, according to the context. A preposition, it may be premised, is a word placed before some other word and governing it. A conjunction, on the other hand, is a word, as is implied in its make-up, that joins words together,—a very different function. A striking example of the confusion referred to is offered by so notable a writer as Robert Browning in *My Last Duchess,* one of his best-known poems. The passage runs:

"But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)."

Those two final words arrest attention and no doubt jar many who are prepared to set down *but* as a preposition, demanding that it be followed by the accusative *me.* It certainly would call for the *me,* if *but* were a preposition. A little reflection, however, will show that it can be, and in Browning's feeling was, a conjunction, and that the line signified, "None puts by the curtain I have drawn for you, but *I* do." In a recent number of so well-standing

a periodical as *The Yale Review* my eye falls on this sentence: "After all, it is not the events but he that makes the day memorable." Here again, *but* obviously is not a preposition but simply joins two parallel substantives in the nominative. Here we are getting a trifle technical, but the principle involved, once grasped, will get you out of a frequent bog-hole in which I have seen good people flounder and exhibit signs of controversial bad temper. In the Browning instance, to assume that such a man, one of the most widely cultured in a generation, would ignorantly fail to use the oblique case, *me,* if he meant it, would be folly. What he was after was to bring out the fact that the Duke of the poem was a supreme egoist,—as he is throughout the little drama,—one who would on all occasions parade the *I.*

The expression, "between you and I," commonly heard, can not, of course, be defended, since *between* is a preposition. But wrong and uneducated as such a locution is, it can be explained, though not upheld, by the underlying egoistic instinct common to mortals. The speaker does not feel humble enough to use the modesty of *me,* his assertive feeling would emerge in the self-centered *I.* Many a mistake of the kind rests in sound psychology, if not in sound construction.

These examples of mistaken uses of common occurrence and so often puzzling to the earnest seeker after linguisitic truth, may serve for hundreds of others, and help the realization of how complex are the causes lying behind the most seemingly simple laws of language. And there is a lesson in it for all who would not be led astray. Again and again, what seems blundering ignorance turns out to be a retention of some good old use; or what appears to be a wilful breaking of a linguistic law is seen to be only a stubborn cleaving to a law which in the passing of time has been lost sight of, or has fallen into desuetude. And we come to see in such tenacious clinging to older native uses how insidiously outside influences, alien in origin, have imperiled the purity of English speech. Judging a tongue by its own laws and by no other, we perceive to be the only safe procedure. And we also perceive that many if not most of the confusions that have arisen as the tongue has developed, through the centuries, are the result of departing from this principle, simple as it may seem, yet in practise utterly lost sight of, to the injury of English as a vehicle of expression.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MUSICAL VALUE OF WORDS

At the time, nearly a hundred years ago, when the late Lord Tennyson was fitting himself to be a poet of major importance, he was studying with infinite loving patience all the intricacies involved in the handling of English words in the measures that make music to any ear trained in the sound values of poetry. He was experimenting with what the critics call tone-color: that placing together of vowel sounds, fortified by consonants which produces a sequence of tune, the variety that makes for melody desired by any true singer. He was learning to discard harsh sibilant juxtapositions of words that thus hurt his music, and he called it "kicking the geese out of the boat." In short, he was a most careful technician, not alone giving pleasure to countless readers of verse, and helping to establish his reputation as the leading British poet for a generation or more, but also, by his precept and practise, handing on a sound

organ for the criticism of the poetic art, very influential upon all verse-writing of his race during his own period and for some time thereafter.

Are Tennyson's results respected to-day in the making and appreciation of verse? Is his exquisite sensitiveness to sound values, with the resultant charm that comes from perfect music, secured by the artistic recognition of the musical possibilities inherent in English words, exhibited by the latter-day poets of England and America? And are those who receive the poetry as sensitively aware of this adjustment of words to make happy rhythms and tone-color that imparts pleasure, as were Tennyson's contemporaries? Such a query is particularly pertinent, because our own generation has come to accept with enthusiasm what is known as free verse, which abandons definite rhyme, and definite rhythms, preferring the looser movement of irregular cadences, and substituting for rhyme as a musical device a straggling, uncertain use of alliteration and an apparent giving up of the Tennysonian care in so using words that impeccable melody is the issue, and a unified musical composition the secured end. Open, almost at random, any one of the numerous anthologies representing the recent and current output in verse (*The New Poetry,* edited by Harriet Monroe and Miss Henderson, her collaborator, is one such),

and your eye will fall on examples of alleged verse which substitute cacophony for music, and throw seemingly to the winds all idea of rhythm as a unifying principle of poetic art. Vowels are not skilfully adjusted, but appear to be slung together haphazard. The strength of consonants is not tempered to our ear with rich voweling, but is allowed to squeak or groan, to hiss or shriek, unaided by the mitigation of more mellifluous surrounding vocables. Harsh, prose-like effects are found in the place of those insinuating appeals to the ear which the elder bards commonly gave us, and which were an aspect of their art deemed necessary to learn and offer, if legitimate reputation were to follow.

Now, the arrival of these ugly irregularities, these staccato effects and prose banalities and their seeming acceptance as worthy attempts to enlarge poetic technique, introducing fresh blood where anemia was present and dry-rot a threatening enemy of poetry, must mean something, and does. For one thing, it means that the so-called realistic ideal, with its premise that anything in life, in humanity, or in Nature, is precious and desirable for the uses of literature, has got into the poetic art, as everywhere else, and at present is a tyranny, demanding that poets who would get a hearing must heed, obey and, in the hideous jargon of the day, come in out of the

wet—or else perish by the way. Hence, Tennyson is regarded as jejune, *vieux jeu* (I have used him simply as typical of the elder ideal); there is impatience even at the mention of his name in the presence of *Les Jeunes.* If we accept for poetry the principle that since it is the imaginative presentation of human life in verse, nothing (in the language of Terence) is alien from its interest, then we must logically admit to its purview all that is vulgar, banal, low, foul, and perhaps hardest of all to bear, a deadly bore. It is all good, if you only think it is good,—so runs the argument.

And, for another point, this increasing carelessness concerning the value of words regarded not as symbols for ideas, but as so many sounds used because they are pleasing to the human ear, can only mean less respect for the aim of all poetry as a high and difficult art, and a dulling of the perception of what makes music in the use of English words. I, for one, sincerely believe that even among the cultured of the younger generation (cultured in the sense that they have had training in school and college) there is less sensibility to the marshaling of sweet sounds through the manipulation of words than was true of their parents. So great has been the influence of a constant exposure to a careless, slipshod, slovenly disregard of the niceties, subtleties

and more refined values of this aspect of poetry—an aspect of immense importance in the consideration of poetic art, unless we are willing to come boldly out and declare that music is not an objective of poetry—that often if representatives of the two generations discuss the subject, they almost seem to be talking alien tongues.

Likewise, it is my conviction that through the same malefic influence we have (particularly if of the younger generation) become somewhat insensitive to that central eternal aim and aspiration of all artistic use of English words: *the creation of beauty.* The moment that is said, one is driven to define *beauty,* for the advocates of cacophony and of ugly realism in language doughtily arise and cry that they, too, are seeking beauty, only by another route. I have no wish to dodge the challenge, and let it therefore be stated, in plain set terms, that beauty as applied to language on the tonal side in any proper conception of it, means, and must mean, that harmonious concordance in the arranging of words and sentences (where literature is our field) which shall result in the esthetic satisfaction of the recipient duly trained to recognize such harmony when it is present. And whenever on the side of the sound of words, in some patterned arrangement, such esthetic satisfaction and pleasure are *not* furnished, because

of the inexpertness, or carelessness, or conscious failure to accept beauty as an object, then the art value of the product suffers. That word *harmony,* the conjoining of parts to a whole that imparts pleasure, runs as a principle through all the arts and, looked at philosophically, may be called a divine nexus that binds together the planets in their orbits, is exhibited in the dance of atoms, and is the one clue in a universe so largely discordant and inexplicable, to the ultimate purpose of the Creator. So, at least, our more imaginative and mystic moments teach us. The painter is after harmony when he "composes" his picture, and makes his colors sing as they are transferred from his palette to the canvas. The composer of music, similarly, in placing the successive parts of his symphony, is actuated by the same purpose, pursues the same principle. The sculptor, turning inchoate blocks of marble into rhythmic shapes, does not for a minute escape the laws of harmony as they apply to space. And the writer, who in prose or poetry, seeks beauty in his composition, a pattern and a tune, that art may be justified of her literary children, is subject to the same law, a servant of the same ideal.

The music of words, therefore, is a part of this universal aim of art, in that it donates to the blessed who can receive it that concordance of sweet sounds

which Shakespeare has in mind when he makes Lorenzo say to Jessica,

"Such harmony is in immortal souls."

When what sets out to be poetry tramples on this law and divine opportunity to transport us through this heavenly harmony, and instead offers us ugly, harsh sounds and sequences of sounds in time, such that suggest, not music, but the awful discords of every-day life where sounds are utile not beautiful,—then it is absurd to call such poetry artistic. It violates one of the highest privileges and surest ways of esthetic satisfaction possible to the art. And all about us at present such violation is apparent, active, virulent and unabashedly exultant.

The argument by analysis may be strengthened by the argument by illustration. Let us take a fairly typical example, not from a tyro of the new school, but from one of its confessed leaders, Amy Lowell.

Ombre Chinoise

"Red foxgloves against a yellow wall streaked with
plum-colored shadows,
A lady with a blue and red sunshade;
The slow dash of waves upon a parapet.
That is all.
Non-existent—immortal—
As solid as the centre of a ring of fine gold."

Read this aloud, and it should be apparent that it has no value whatever of tone-color (the music that results from the skilled placing together of alternate vowels and consonants to make a pleasing sequence of sounds), nor any value of rhythmic flow discoverable to the normal ear. Tested as music, it is prose-wording not poetry at all. I am not contending that this author, whose work is now done, has not proved herself a poet in some of her poems, nor denying that as an example of figurative language and imaginative conception this present piece may not have attraction, albeit slight. I am merely centering on musical values, the theme of the chapter, and asserting with vigor that in that respect the poem entirely fails to meet the demand we must make on one who takes a central place in a modern movement to broaden and better poetic art. And it is a very mild specimen, compared with what might easily be put in evidence.

The truth of the contention, then, that the onslaught of the "new poetry" upon our poetic sensibilities seems to have produced sad results in blurring the sense of values where the music of verse is concerned, to say nothing of other values equally injured, is plain enough, at least to the present critic. Music is more than a desideratum of poetry; it is a necessity. In its absence poetry is deformed by so much, defamed in its proud historic claims, and

all who follow it and love it impoverished in their rights and exposed to the danger of being warped in their tastes.

The claim is loudly made to-day that the interest in poetry is looking up, more people than ever are buying it and talking about it; and the cause is attributed to the popularity, not to say notoriety, of the best-known writers of the school. There is a specious semblance of truth in this. It is not to be denied that anthologies of verse flourish, and that the doings of these grotesque bards of both sexes seem to have a great deal of news value. But, alas, by the quieter tests, the tests of sound art, it may well be feared that while more folk laugh at some grotesquerie of a singer of acrobatic posturings than ever before, more people also confuse publicity with fame, and the ability to attract attention with the turning out of poetry that is really poetry. It is my profound conviction, and a sad one, that for twenty years the best interests of poetry in the elder and nobler sense, have been damaged, let us hope not irretrievably, by the antics of those to whom *l'art nouveau* is more precious than the everlasting laws that govern beauty.

Can anything be done about this deplorable blunting of taste as concerns the art of poetry, and indeed the whole art of Letters? Possibly through educa-

tion, which shall teach those in the formative period of their culture to appreciate the elder poets through whom we have learned the essential poetic laws, and so have ready at hand a touchstone whereby to test every claimant in song at the present time. To say this, does not imply a surly turning of the back upon present endeavor, nor the unwillingness to recognize new beauty when it appears. It does imply a sturdy insistence that beauty, with whatever broader definition, be present, and that music, as one of its legitimate appeals, be not maltreated as so often happens with the favorites of the moment, when topical interest, not charm, eccentric personality, not dignity, and sensation, not emotional strength held in leash by obeying form, with attention to the inevitable restraints of genuine art, are so unhappily the false gods of modern worship. For all such, however long deferred, a *dies iræ,* a veritable day of wrath, is sure to come.

CHAPTER XVII

SEX DISCRIMINATION IN ENGLISH

One of the most awkward idioms that ever crept into English speech came from the historical fact of man's domination over women. I refer to the confusion existing in the use of the personal pronoun, *he* or *she*. We are all familiar with a sentence like this: "If a man does so-and-so, he will find,"—where man stands not for the masculine gender, but for the human race, as if he were the only thing in sight. Or, you get a variant of the same sort of thing in this sentence, a very common form of expression: "When a person is in a tight place, he has to get out of it," where obviously *person* really means one of either sex, yet the masculine pronoun follows the noun.

Writers have long felt the clumsiness of such a locution, and tried their best to get around it. Sinclair Lewis, for example, in his recent book, *The Man Who Knew Coolidge,* writes: "No teacher is

allowed to teach in the school unless he—or she, as the case may be—unless he proves that at the last election he turned out and voted." Mr. Lewis, please observe, knows that the chances are good the teacher will be feminine, yet he has to return to the repetition of *he,* because he started with it—a very cumbersome way out of the trouble. It is perfectly safe to say that such a back-handed method of indicating meaning, and the failure to invent one pronoun that might stand equally for both sexes, would never have happened, were it not that for many centuries man has had the upper hand of women in business, politics, war and home life. Scholars, faced by this lack, have actually proposed to create the pronoun *thon,* which could be used indiscriminately, whether man or woman were in mind, in framing the sentence referred to. Certainly, it would be a great convenience; but, like most scholar suggestions, it is not likely to be adopted, for the reason that speech is not made that way, but spontaneously, impulsively, in the mouths of people who are forced quickly to express their thoughts in the constant, rapid interchanges of life. But with the radical changes to-day which have resulted in no less than a revolution in woman's status in every conceivable relation of human life, it has become evident that she no longer plays second fiddle, as of old, and that therefore an

idiom invented when man was ranked as her superior, and resulting in the clumsiness and inconsistency I speak of, is more objectionable than it was once held to be; and is likely, sooner or later, to be got around in some way.

I think the first man to act on this likelihood, and take humorous advantage of it, is no less a personage than Bernard Shaw, who, in his just published work, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism,* uses the *feminine* pronoun throughout, just as before writers used the *masculine.* He does this because, as he explains, he is writing, not for men but for women; his delightful argument being that women, being more intelligent than the male animal, will be more likely to listen to him and understand what he is saying. So, instead of writing, "Any one would think that he," Shaw has it, "Any one would think that she." Thus (for the first time, as far as I know) the feminine pronoun is made generic, that is, to stand for the human race, exactly as the masculine pronoun has so long done. To indulge in prophecy, I should point to Shaw as a pioneer in a use destined to become familiar and unnoted, in course of time. Then, when one has a right to use either pronoun to mean both sexes, without any leaning toward one side or the other, the users of English will bestir themselves to coin some

middle-ground pronoun, understood to signify both man and woman, and thus a present defect in English will be done away with, to the clearer understanding and better expression of all concerned.

Did any of my readers ever stop to ask himself (or herself, for here I get into the very trouble I have been writing about) how the Adam and Eve story, with its familiar moral, "the woman did it," might have read if there had been a woman's Bible, and some one of the sex had told us about the Garden of Eden? Don't ever forget that the Genesis account was written by a male hand, and the way woman gets the blame proves it! And if it is so in religion, you may be fairly sure it will be so in language. The whole thing illustrates how surely language depicts, however unwittingly, not only the thought-processes but the social habits and beliefs of the race as well. One of the most interesting ways to study human history and trace the social evolution of mankind is to be found right here in speech that we use daily. Often it is buried deep under the surface, and we give no heed to the under-meanings, naturally, since we are thinking of immediate results, practical uses, not of origins. Nevertheless, if you get in the habit of studying words a little, and come to realize how they are veritable caches for hiding folk-ways and so register many a bygone custom,

superstition, or ideal, you will get an amazing amount of light upon human affairs and human beings.

An illustration or two is in order. My first one strikingly shows how society grades a woman according to her success, both social and moral, in the "strange, eventful history" of days on this earth. A single word, in this case, contains a deal of social thinking; it runs the whole gamut between high and low in human fate. The word is that commonly spelled *queen*. A queen is a woman who has attained to the highest social position known to mankind. That same word, in its earliest use the best part of a thousand years ago, meant simply *woman*, nothing more; it was, in other words, merely the generic designation of the sex. But as time unfolded, a woman, again and again, came to climb up on to a throne, and so, in many a country the world saw the spectacle of a member of the human race attaining to the eminence implied in the word *queen*. But, alas, woman in time's course, can and did climb down, as well as up. And sometimes, too often for a comfortable reflection, woman got down so low as to be in the gutter, "on the street," in the common phrase. And then this same woman-word, doing double duty, came to be spelled *quean*,—still the very same word, mark you,—and if you will look up that

word, used frequently in the Elizabethan times and not yet entirely passed away, you will see that it has the definition: "a low woman, a slut." What a dramatic epitome of the possibilities of womanhood, for high and low, good or bad, is thus shut up in the narrow confines of the one word that was to become, when good fortune smiled on it, the symbol of a ruler of the peoples, and when bad fortune was its lot, a sorry reproach to the sex! The fates of words, it can be seen, are as dramatic as the fates of men; indeed, they are but symbols of the fates of men, and one word, like "one man" in Shakespeare's line, "plays many parts."

My next is again an example of how the sexes influence each other in the coinage of words, or their use imaginatively to convey meanings. It has to do with personification, which imputes sex to inanimate objects, and seems to get a flavor of poetry out of so doing. It must have been a man, one feels, who first gave the feminine quality to the moon. Why is the moon any more womanlike than the sun, to which we impart masculinity? Ask the primitive man who dubbed the orb of night "my lady moon." Perhaps that person thought the light of the moon was more mystic and romantic; it is a guess. And why did the same ancestor call the sun a male? Or again, possibly, for the reason that the central

luminary in our solar system gave forth the light and warmth that made life a going concern. It is a guess. All the more a guess, because, curiously, the Germans just reverse this dealing with sun and moon; they say, *die sonne,* which is feminine, and *der mond,* which is masculine. Can anybody suggest a difference between the two races implied in this rather odd contrast? Why does a German think of the sun as a lady, when the Anglo-Saxon thinks of it as a gentleman? I, for one, give up the answer.

It is really rather remarkable that man has a tendency to personify all inanimate things he is brought into intimate relations with, and to give them the feminine gender. Consider ships, and see how invariably the pronoun *she* is used of them; similarly the engine driver speaks of his locomotive, and the baseball man apostrophizes his ball club. It would seem to mean affection always. The interesting question arises, if woman had equally controlled the making of language, would she, also stirred by the affectionate feeling of possession, have called *her* belongings—her golf bag, for example—by a masculine appellation? It seems not, surely, and if so, why is this not a tribute to the far more universal domination of the fair sex? In this imaginative personifying of non-human things, which is illustrated in language, modern and civilized man is

like primitive man. The farther back you go in human history, the more you find primitive folk richly personifying the whole natural world of phenomena,—earth, sky, trees, mountains, rivers,—all that man looks out upon and peoples with imagined creatures. The thunderbolt is some spear hurled by Deity, and a storm at sea is the angry mood of a god of the waters, wreaking vengeance on poor, helpless earth mortals who have trusted themselves to the deep. The personification in words like *sun* and *moon,* is the survival of all this, and chronicles man's earlier story as he battles with the elements and has his sense of poetry aroused by the vast panorama of Nature spread out before his unlearned eyes. So we need not be surprised, after all, when uneducated persons impute femininity to some inanimate object, or even if educated folk continue to do it, although the time is long past since those who called the sun *he* or the moon *she* have any belief in the reality of the personification. The fact is, it is only very slowly that the primitive faith in such things dies, and when it does, it still continues to register the earlier superstitions. And because sex is so vital, so central in the human history, do we find it at this late day playing its prehistoric rôle in human fate, and hence in human language. It is a fascinating field of inquiry.

There is one thing about this matter of language likely to be lost sight of. As words are manufactured, put together in sentences and used for the interchange of thought and the expression of emotion, by men and women all over the earth, and whatever the tongue they use, this above all else is true of them: They are not invented by scholars in their studies, nor selected and arranged carefully, after due analysis and being passed upon by a wise jury for their fitness and acceptability. Nothing of the kind. On the contrary, they are always hastily born, made up on the spur of the moment, under the pressure of need, and in lieu of something better. Words and their ways are thus creatures of the emotions and imagination far more than of the brain and judgment. This is vastly important to bear in mind when considering their uses, and debating questions of right and wrong. It may well seem otherwise, because later, when the words get into general use, scholars, grammarians, those who analyze and reflect and judge, scrutinize them carefully, and begin to frame laws to explain them and restrictions about handling them, so that it is easy to fall into the mistake of believing they got their start that way. But not at all. The laws, principles, rules, come afterward; the speech itself, as it were, hurries into the world, with many an inconsistency, many a

mistake and carelessness. Often, they are love-children rather than the progeny of lawful wedlock. But, having *got* in, and for some reason being liked by the people who use them, they struggle along through life very much as we humans do, and take a chance at survival; and *do* survive through their meeting some need and being liked by handlers of language, rather than because of their correctness and perfections.

Words, then, are not made by rule; the rule is invented after the word gets here by specialists putting their microscopes on the words. And in the creative act of birth, the imagination (this is terribly important to remember) always plays a leading rôle. That mankind is imaginative, poetic, romantic, can be mathematically proved by a study of language, to see whence it comes, and how and why it persists, if it does, and why it dies when lacking in vital value. Words are imperfect vessels, but lovable withal, exactly for the reason that human beings are imperfect vessels—but also lovable. Never place the head before the heart, when trying to understand language in its uses among men and women.

We may sum it up thus: language was made for men, not men for language. And women have a tremendous share in it, exactly as they have in the life of which it is but the expression.

CHAPTER XVIII

CLIPPED WORDS: A CONVENIENCE AND A CUSTOM

LANGUAGE (or rather the people behind the language who make it) is always trying for short-cuts of one sort or another. Economy of time and attention are for ever working when words and their forms are under consideration. There is a steady tendency to reduce the length of words, making a part do for the whole. Condensation, in this way, is a law of speech, and a little study of the problem will reveal to what an astonishing extent this custom prevails,—a custom, you will please observe from my title, that begins as a convenience. When it has been practised long enough, all realization that the word or phrase in question was once used in its full extent, and is now but a fraction of what it at first was, is lost with those who daily make use of it. Hence, the clipped words I am talking about come to be as good as the fuller words they were of old but a fraction of, and die in the odor of sanctity, or else

live on, mingling in the best linguistic society. And notice at the beginning that when we first clip the word, making a part do service for the whole, it seems vulgar and all wrong, so that purists and pedants raise a great outcry against it, and warn folk not to commit such a sin against language. But in the end, they have to succumb, for gradually the word becomes perfectly respectable in this mutilated state. Let me illustrate by the every-day word *mob,* which certainly looks like a matter-of-fact English monosyllable, as properly stodgy as Burton's Ale. But in reality, it is only one syllable of a three-syllabled Latin adjective. The full phrase is *mobile vulgus,* meaning the movable, i. e., easily moved, vulgar crowd. In the eighteenth century, when its use was recent, Samuel Johnson, the great dictionary-maker of that time, harangued vigorously against such a blasphemy. Now, we use it all the while, with never a thought of its origin. Indeed, it is safe to say that almost all persons asked about it, would declare that *mob* was obviously one of those terse words of native birth, as far removed from a Latin ancestry as any in the tongue.

In the scientific and industrial world we are constantly coining words to meet some new need or stand for some new thing that modern invention has brought into existence, and if you will watch such

words, when, as usually happens, they are derived from the Latin or Greek, you will find a struggle always under way to simplify and shorten them, since at the start they are apt to be many syllabled and cumbersome. Take as an excellent illustration the automobile, most commonly in evidence nowadays of all machines used by man. We begin by calling it, as I just wrote it, *auto-mobile;* that is, by etymology, a self-going contraption. Then we start to reduce its size: call it *auto* as likely as not. Or, starting with the phrase *motor-car,* we reduce that to *car.* So that just now, people say *auto,* or *car,* and those who stick to automobile or to motor-car, although it is plain they are more correct, are certainly in the minority. And at the end *car* will probably win out.

In the same way, an interesting transition is at present under way with *telephone,* another word in use every minute of the day everywhere, because the instrument it designates is so often used. I have been noticing with much amusement how first-rate writers whose instinct is to cling on to the complete word *telephone* are gradually being driven to the wall and forced to adopt *phone,* either with or without the sign of contraction—*'phone* or *phone.* And in conversation, which is always more radical than the written or printed word, *phone* is so common that we might almost say it has won the day.

Frankly (we all have our little weaknesses, linguistic or otherwise), I have an aristocratic prejudice in favor of *telephone.* I never, at least that is my belief, said *phone* in my life, and never wrote it. But I grant you that it makes me old-fashioned, and that sooner or later, *phone,* with no mark to show it is a contraction from *telephone,* will be the form universally in use, and speech users will no more think of the older and longer form than people to-day think of what *mob* came from originally. However, as by that time I shall be comfortably dead, and quite indifferent to any change in language that may engage the contentions of mortals, why worry? I am merely drawing attention here to the fact that, whether we like it or leave it, language insists on aiming at economy, time-saving, at the expense of what seems like elegance. It hurts my feelings, and that of others, but such is the way of speech, and, setting aside personal feelings, you and I have to accept the verdict. As good a moral as we can get out of it appears to be:

> Be not the last to lay the old aside,
> Nor yet the first by whom the new is tried.

Or, to put it in prose, *take the middle ground.*

Sometimes the changes in clipped words are so slight as to make the question of right use quite

puzzling. Take the familiar word *around*. Do you ever write it *round*, and if so, when and why? Beyond any dispute, it is frequently given the shorter form, written either with or without the mark of contraction—*'round* or *round*. If you look it up in a good dictionary (the great *New English Dictionary* is an absolutely trustworthy one, in all such discussion, but if you have a late edition of Webster's, or the *Standard*, or the *Century*, you will not go wrong); looking it up, I say, you will find that the original word is *around*, but that the contraction *round* is often substituted, and in certain uses is not to be condemned. Personally, I would not put the contraction in, but would just write it *round*, and let it go at that. *Round* has undoubtedly come to stay, and will gradually oust the full form, *around*.

Or take still another illustration, which is more intricate and hence difficult. This time, I take it from the world of sport: the noun *fan*, meaning originally a baseball enthusiast, though of wider application. We must, I think, distinguish it from the same word in the sense of a verb, as, the striker *fanned*, which simply means he struck out, or fanned the air. No, *fan* as a noun, referring to the kind of person who, in the presence of the National game, yells, hurrahs, throws pop bottles at the umpire, and otherwise disports himself in a manner to

make him a promising candidate for a lunatic asylum, is a rather tricky word to explain. It might also seem to point to those patrons of baseball who democratically sit on the bleachers exposed to the full rays of the sun, and so have to fan themselves while the game is under way. But I would hazard the guess that *fan* belongs with our clipped words, and is really a contraction of *fanatic*. To my surprise my *Webster,* which happens to be the dictionary right on my desk as I talk about it, does not acknowledge the existence of *fan* in this sense; surprise, I say, because surely it has been in common use long enough to get its place among the colloquialisms in America. So, guessing while the guessing is good, I vote for *fanatic* as the parent of *fan*. It is as plausible as the other explanation, *fan* because the fan is fanning himself on the cheaper sun-lit seats; indeed, it seems less far-fetched. Perhaps some reader will offer a still better suggestion.

I spoke of *mob* as a word of one syllable reduced from a Latin word of three syllables. In the same way, the word *cab*—and we still say taxi-cab, not giving up a word because the horse cab is now so infrequent—comes from another foreign word, this time French, and of four syllables: *cabriolet*. You can see how unwilling speech users would be to

hang on to such a comparatively elaborate word, when such a succinct, brief, satisfactory condensation as *cab* could be substituted. And so, *voilà,* we get the familiar one-syllabled vocable!

There is a different kind of clipping of words, though the same principle is behind it. I refer to a change not in spelling perhaps but in the sound and pronunciation of the word in question. Take the familiar *coupé.* First it came into English use from the French, spelled as I show it here, and with the proper mark above it to indicate it is a French past participle, and to be spelled accordingly. Then came a very drastic, at first startling change; the accent of the second syllable began to be left off and as now used by uneducated folk, at least, we hear it on every side pronounced exactly as if its right spelling were *coop.* It grates on one's linguistic nerves, of course, and is not heard as yet in polite society. But heaven only knows if *coupé,* pronounced as *coop,* will not conquer in some future unhappy day. The stern law of boiling down for the purpose of saving time, you observe, is again at work.

Another French word, coming into our tongue somewhat earlier, may be mentioned as illustrating the same principle: *café.* Newspapers began to drop the accent over the *e* which showed it was a two-

syllabled word, whereupon unlettered persons began to call it *cafe,* pronounced exactly like our word, *calf*. Probably no one who is reading this essay has failed to hear it so spoken, at least once. It would seem horrible to imagine a time when the one-syllabled *cafe* should shoulder out the more elegant *café;* yet stranger things have happened. However, the fact that French is so generally taught in school and college points to the unlikelihood of this not-to-be-desired change. As a general principle, you can be fairly sure that whenever a word gets into English from any foreign tongue, it will have things done to it by way of twist and change at the hands of those who insist that it obey the laws of English rather than of its own tongue.

While I am writing this chapter, it happens that the name of the Italian aviator Nobile is daily of first-page importance in the newspapers. Those who know Italian are aware that the proper native pronunciation of his surname is in three syllables—*No-bil-e,* the *e* having vocalic value. But as I hear my friends discuss him, from day to day, almost all of them call him, naturally, *No-bill;* not knowing about that final *e,* they make him a two-syllabled person, I imagine to the affront of Italians who hear it. English, unlike the Italian, is not a tongue where final vowels of words are pronounced, though,

by the way, this was once so in our own language. As a result, when foreign words are brought into our speech, such words are made to conform to our ways of accenting. It may not be done at once, and generally isn't, but in the end that is what occurs.

I spoke of the words popularized by new mechanical devices like the automobile and the telephone. Still later, in introducing to our language the new words that have to stand for the new things in modern life, is the airplane. The aerial science, at present, rules not only the sky but human interest as expressed in the newspaper, which likes nothing so well as a hero or heroine of the deep blue to arouse the perfervid admiration of readers. And with clipped words or phrases in mind, I notice that the same process is at work as in the other cases touched on: namely, instead of *airplane,* we are rapidly tending toward halving it to *plane.* Of course, a moment's reflection will show that the airplane is but one of various possible kinds of plane; but it happens to be dominant, in everybody's mind, and so plane is understood to mean the kind of machine that lifts the airman into the air, and enables him to skim continents and pass over seas and girdle the globe, as he soon will do, binding the peoples together in a common recognition of intrepid flight and fearless venturings over land and water. Again it seems

reasonable to look ahead a little and see a day when *plane,* with no need of the prefatory *air,* will be universally understood as referring to the air bird with the metal wings.

Before we gazed at airplanes in the heavens, we were wont to look up and behold balloons, and wonder at their power to float in space. This reminds me to draw attention to the somewhat curious fact that a *balloon,* the word coming to us from the French and being found also in the Italian, is nothing originally but a *ball;* a ball, as it happens, not used on the earth, as a baseball is, but in the air instead. In fact, the definition of a balloon at first was a large inflated leather ball kicked about (like a football) in sport. But we came to use the simpler old English form, *ball,* and applied the fuller Italian form to air balls, called *balloons.* One of the commonest customs of English expression is to take the same word and then, with variant spelling, make it serve practically as two words. I illustrated this in a previous chapter when discussing *queen* and *quean.*

The upshot of it all is this: you can count on language aiming at condensation, making short-cuts to convey a meaning, and never hesitating to clip, disfigure and otherwise maltreat a word, or an idiom, when the end in view is brevity and a terse reduction of the time needed to get an idea over through

language to the children of men. It always has been done, it always will be, and the refinements and elegances of speech use have to suffer in this fashion and must put up with it as best they can. I am not defending it, for often it hurts my feelings as I have stated, to see it take place. But I am chronicling linguistic facts quite beyond my power, or anybody else's, to control; and the proper attitude is to acknowledge and understand the ways of language, and to strive personally for clearness, felicity and strength in our speech uses.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MIGHT OF MONOSYLLABLES

IN THAT famous passage in Genesis, "And God said, Let there be light, and there was light," it is worth noticing that every word is a monosyllable. The effect of this bullet-like utterance upon the human race is perhaps as great as that of any other sentence of like extent known to the race. And I am convinced that one of the reasons for this superlative influence is the fact that the thought is expressed in short, one-syllabled words, which as a result of their incisive brevity wing their way to the mark—our minds and consciences.

The might of monosyllables could not be more strikingly illustrated. Force, directness, the ping of an impact that challenges attention, such result is secured by these words of one syllable that fairly hurl themselves at our head. Other things equal, it can be relied on that the short word, the simple word, the word that cuts out all ornament, and makes its

meaning plain as the nose on your face, is the winning word, be it for pleasure or profit, utility or artistic aim, immediate appeal or meditative enjoyment as we sit down with a good book for a half-hour of imaginative living.

To suggest that in our letter-writing, our conversation, or our literary work we exclusively use monosyllables, would be absurd. It would cramp our style, limit our vocabulary, and do great injustice to the words of rich implication and organ-like sound so frequently to be found of polysyllabic size, words acquired from the various foreign tongues, and carrying harmonies, overtones, choral sweeps of connotation that vastly enrich the total content of our speech resources. Nevertheless, it is true that as the basis of a desirable style in manipulating English words, the instinct for monosyllables, and the acquired power in their use, is a precious acquirement, whether it be a heaven-born gift or an aptitude painfully developed by much study and practise.

And it is something never to be forgotten that these briefer words, more often than not of but one syllable, in contrast with the Latinistic words of many syllables, have one characteristic that gives them immense significance: they are native and root deep in the heart of all who use them.

It is safe to make this generalization: words that

originate in the emotions that spring from the heart are words of native derivation. And they are commonly words of one syllable, or at least, rarely if ever words of many syllables, since the latter imply foreign origin. *Home, hearth, life, death, love, hate*—how surely these symbols of the fundamental human facts and relations are native, brief, monosyllabic! When Dickens wished to make his famous Micawber a humorous character, he seized on a trait of his own father, John Dickens, in making him talk steadily in Latinized, elaborate language, unable to say the simplest thing without giving it an ornate dress of pompous, stilted speech. Nor was that delightful fictive person a mere caricature, for many people, without going so far as Micawber, do becloud an unimportant thought with verbiage quite out of proportion to the value of what is said. Dickens, in his *David Copperfield,* has drawn in the person of a charming droll an image of a familiar human tendency not to fit the thinking to the word, but to substitute rhetoric for plain speaking. One of the great lessons of life has been learned when we are willing to put into practise the principle of saying a simple thing in a simple way.

Of special worth for study and imitation, therefore, are those writers who can be pointed to as models in this matter of simplicity, directness and

native quality of language, writers whose vocabulary leans to the words, one syllabled or two, with a world of meaning packed pregnantly into a small compass, words bespeaking the Anglo-Saxon roots of the tongue, and having for the ear a certain rugged strength, or staccato beat that suggests recurrent piston strokes. An indescribable homely ease, too, is the effect of such style; it is like meeting a man in slippered relaxation instead of full evening dress. The diction of the Bible gives the note I mean, and so does Bunyan whose manner is grounded on the Bible, as we know. Modern writers like Stevenson and Kipling, to name only two, have this homespun quality at its best, though with them it is often modified, to the enrichment of their style, by elements foreign-born, and involving free use of the long, polysyllabic words that make for music and afford opportunity for happy modulations and harmonies in place of simpler melodies. Nevertheless, on analysis the style of both these masters will be found to be dominantly of Anglo-Saxon strength and simplicity, which is but another way of saying that the might of monosyllables is exemplified in their work. Hear, for 'nstance, the following simple brief sentence from Kipling's, *The Light That Failed:* "He had never before seen men in bulk gone back to their beginnings." It is a description of a battle-

field the day after the battle, and its terse grimness is congruous with the depicted scene, while the words are rapped out as if a drum were beating requiem above the slain.

The use of the word *requiem* brings to mind the universally loved poem by Stevenson to which he gives that title, and it happens to be an excellent example of the quality in language use I am talking of. It is of great emotional appeal in its elegiac way, and if examined closely for its style of diction, it will be found to consist, with the sole exception of the Latin word *verse* in the second stanza, of simple, mostly monosyllabic words of native origin. Of extremely few poems in the English tongue of equal length can this be said. Notice the reiterant iambic beat of the words, giving an effect of finality that matches the thought; just that impression of grave, sweet, deep-souled satisfaction that could not have been so well indicated by any other measure, nor by whatever eloquence of more richly embroidered, classic-born language:

Requiem

"Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave, and let me lie
Glad did I live and gladly die,
    And I laid me down with a will.

"This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies, where he wished to be,
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."

No doubt a too exclusive devotion to monosyllabic effects would maim the music that comes from free-flowing many-syllabled words woven into sentences full of sonorous reverberations. The Bible, while beyond question based, as we have said, on an Anglo-Saxon predilection for native words, gives ample testimony to the value of longer words, skilfully commingling the two kinds of effect: the bite of the monosyllable, with its assurance of sinewy strength; and the Latinized linguistic loveliness, where elements of music are superadded. Sometimes, the two seem to be kept apart, much depending on the author's mood and subject-matter. Consider, for instance, the twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd," a sublime example of simplicity, and then beside it place such a magnificently ornate thing as the chapter of Ezekiel, which Moulton in his *Modern Reader's Bible* calls "The Wreck of the Good Ship Tyre." No finer use of that element in English which is contributed by the classical tongues conjoined with Anglo-Saxon flavors can be found anywhere.

It should also be noticed that the fuller and freer-

sounding words that we mostly associate with the foreign-derived elements of English, whereas the native words are shorter and so often monosyllabic, are not seldom supplied from the native word-hoard, after all, by the device of compound formation. *Loving kindness,* for illustration, is practically one word and sometimes so written. It is beautifully native, yet gets the effect of a four-syllabled word, it will be seen, exactly like the Latin-born *tribulation* in accentuation. This habit of compound formations goes deep into the English linguistic past, and is entirely in consonance with the genius of the tongue. It has fallen into comparative disuse in modern English, but there are signs a plenty in contemporary style of its rehabilitation, writers of talent evidently recognizing what a fine and largely neglected resource this making of compounds is. We are more likely to-day to say *blood-tie* than the *tie of blood,* which once would have been the preferred way. The former, it can be felt, is closer-knit, draws the thought into a more forceful unit of effect. I find with those who use English for practical or scientific purpose a notable tendency of late to recover this largely disused native power to make terse compounds instead of amplified, more elaborate statement. A remarkable illustration is found in a recent issue of *The Scientific American,* where, in an

article on physical posture, occur the following hyphened words: "gravity-tension-relieving-posture." This four barreled noun, expanded, means, "a posture which relieves the tension put upon the human body by the working of the law of gravity." A long sentence, it will be perceived, reduced to a single compound noun!

By this well-handled use of native compound formations, then, any loss on the side of music in manipulating the terse monosyllabic speech can be happily supplemented by making use of the innate powers of English for polysyllabic formations not Latin or Greek, nor derived from Romance tongues like French, Italian, or Spanish, but true-born English coinages. The fact is that English, unlike some of the other Germanic tongues such as German and Dutch, has for centuries, and particularly ever since the Renaissance which threw so many thousands of words of classical origin into English for assimilation, somewhat neglected its own native powers in word choice and word formation. It was not until the exploitation of the Old English by modern scholars, assisted by such writers as William Morris and others, that a reaction came in favor of restoring these pristine capacities of English expression. Those now coming into the educational opportunity can take advantage of this return to native resources,

as an elder generation could not do. And as part of it, more and more all interested in broadening, enriching and glorifying English style must have a sense of what is here called the might of monosyllables, because the monosyllable might be termed a symbol of a sentiment which could be embodied in the motto, "English for the English."

The might of monosyllables blended with the music of polysyllables—there is a combination in which strength and charm mingle to produce effective results in English expression. He who, wishing to secure such happy effects, avoids the forceful one- or two-syllabled words as too homely, runs the danger of eviscerating his style. And he who, on the other hand, draws too much on the music to be got from elements in English of which Latin is a type, runs a counter-danger: a flagrant example of which is offered by Samuel Johnson, whose extreme tendency toward words a foot-and-a-half long (scholastically, sesquipedalian words) is notorious in our literary annals. The writings of the late A. E. Freeman, noted English historian, may be referred to as an example of the other extreme. He was a positive fanatic in his tendency to use nothing but words (and idioms) of native origin, so that within the limits of a brief paragraph he will repeat one such word several times, instead of varying his style with

synonyms or equivalents found in the elements not of native derivation. At times, this peculiarity produced an effect of monotony and implied a poverty of resource in the handling of the tongue which was by no means true of him, fine, vigorous writer as he indubitably was. A happy mean is the desideratum. Johnson was too pompously ornate and circuitous; Freeman, so to say, is too homespun in his manner. But of the two extremes Freeman was nearer right. He had a keen instinct for the might of the monosyllable, and his hang for native words and idioms lent a vernacular strength and felicity to his expression that make him a model in the command of homely heart-warming appeals. There is a difference between the use of native words and idioms, be it added. The latter are always right (one should never be unidiomatic), whereas with the words themselves, their dominant note should be native but tempered, as has here been set down, by a judicious admixture of those ingredients of style that testify to classical resources.

Let it be steadily borne in mind that in drawing attention to the important place of these brief, pungent, homespun words in the general manipulation of the mother-tongue, I am only emphasizing one aspect of English expression. The subject has many sides and the question as to how large a part we should

give to the native words and locutions is always directly related to the particular use of English intended: whether it be conversational, or that of more formal address; the English proper for private correspondence or for public writing in its manifold genres and varieties and also what the aim may be, communication, persuasion, conviction, or fascination. With these reservations understood, however, it may be boldly affirmed in summary that, as a bullet to its mark, so an English monosyllable has the advantage over other language, in its power of impact and its seizure of the human emotions. The use of the word *might* to express this infectious force of monosyllables is therefore justified.

CHAPTER XX

SECTIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENGLISH

ELSEWHERE I made a reference to Arnold's phrase, literature of the "center." He intended it to apply to that type of Letters made by the unquestioned masters using English that was possessed of "the high quality,"—another of his famous phrases: that type of Letters which was the aristocratic model for all who appreciate style and care to distinguish between the finer and the coarser grades of performance.

Nobody worth listening to will deny that this literature, representing the choicest product of the writers by universal consent acclaimed the best, should and does contain the finest examples of expression, judged as an art, to be found wherever the tongue is spoken and set down upon the printed page. Not to know this product, to be insensitive to its excellences and felicities, to turn away from it to more debatable specimens of English use, would be

a flagrant case of putting the cart before the horse. But to concede this, as we must, is not, if we are sensible, to overlook the very important contribution to literature, and first to the language which makes literature possible, made by localities on all sides; words and idioms which come freshly into the general storehouse of speech, with a smack of mother-earth to them, a racy quality of the soil, a delightful unconventionality, and an unworn vigor which chronicles the noteworthy gain to the tongue in question. For that authoritative central manner of speech always runs one risk; the risk of growing stale, falling into stereotyped ways of expression, the clichés harped on so much by the late Amy Lowell, with poetry in mind. And the local contributions, or sectional additions to the tongue, have at least this virtue, a shining one: they are racier, closer to origins. An investigation of them will serve to increase one's respect for folk-ways of speech. And, as a matter of fact, speech of the center, whether we know it or not, has always been thus freshened, invigorated, by these contributions from the soil that retain pristine strength lacking in the too civilized language-areas,—the drawing-room, the urban club, the literary corner, the field of diplomacy or of fashionable society.

We are aware to what remarkable extent the

local fiction and drama of our time has thus enlarged the vocabulary, reintroduced good old uses into common circulation, and thrown new light, welcome as such illumination must always be, upon the possible powers of English expression. It might be said that the whole story of language shows how constantly localisms, at first unstylish and remote from polite acceptance, creep into the tongue, and in the end find such firm lodgment there as to seem not like newcomers but the very foundation of its idiomatic life. Our American literature, in the hands of southern and western writers, has been conspicuous for this wholesome contribution. Think in the older generation, of what Mark Twain and Bret Harte did for the California dialect; of Craddock's revelation, in twenty books, of the curiously isolated speech of the Tennessee mountaineers, and of Cable's Creole stories, painting the patois of New Orleans! How much Owen Wister in his successive cowboy tales has done to let us into the outdoor life of the plains, adding, who can doubt it, many a word that speaks of the sheep ranch, the round-up, or the long trail toward the setting sun! Think, coming nearer to the present, what Sinclair Lewis has done to make us hear the language of the Middle West, as did many another before him; or consider the many authors who have studied that great melting-

pot-of-the-nations that goes under the misleading denominator, New York City. To-day, it is temperate to say that every state has its spokesman, almost every hamlet its interpreter,—and always with a direct bearing upon English idiom, pouring streams of fresh words into the central word-hoard which is a reservoir into which all writers may and should dip, if they would use the language in its full potentiality. Of late, Mrs. Peterkin of South Carolina has been depicting the negro life on her own plantation with truth and power and charm in three pieces of fiction; she is but one of a group which, up and down the land, is contributing not only literature but literature demanding and receiving a new argot, dialect, patois, local utterance, call it what you will. The effect of this, while it broadens our knowledge of the countless types making up the United States and likewise enlarges our understanding sympathy for fellow Americans, also gives us vivid perception of what language can do that does not narrowly confine itself to the speech of drawing-room or polite assembly but would comprehensively take in all the varieties and vigors of idiom spoken anywhere in this amazingly diverse country. Now it is Willa Cather asking us to hear the language of Arizona, as earlier Hamlin Garland bade us know the homely speech of Wisconsin. Or, to come to the very present, Rol-

väag bids us go back to the settlement of the Dakotas, the best part of a century ago, and realize what the Norwegians faced as they strove to conquer Nature and blaze new trails. Or, Carl Van Vechten, in *Nigger Heaven* and other novels, directs our attention to the dark Harlem in upper New York which in itself is as remote from Fifth Avenue as the original African jungle whence came the negroes who there live and have their being. He makes the black man show us his soul by speaking his own tongue. I am not giving a catalogue, for that were to write a companion book, but merely illustrating, haphazard, by a few typical cases the vast attempts, many successful, to put America on the literary map, all of them significant in this business of widening our sense of English as it is used on these shores, with all sorts of variations from the parent speech brought over here so long since by the forefathers.

As this chapter is being written, I chance to be reading a book of the season, by a new author, Maristan Chapman, a novel called *The Happy Mountain*. It comes pat to my purpose here, for it is a capital story of Tennessee hill-folk whose speech, as reported in the dialect familiar to a woman who herself came from the region depicted, contains startling archaisms, often driving us straight back to Shakespeare's time and tongue; a language re-

tained by these quaint mountaineers because they have remained isolated from the civilized world whose idioms change rapidly in the fierce attrition of the cities. You get a keen sense of this kinship with the Elizabethans in reading such a sentence as the following:

"The Howards' farmstead was fere and fellowly with the countryside."

You rub your eyes and wonder if that be possible on the page before you! Yet it is only showing us again what Craddock showed us long ago about the lingo of remote, pure-blood (in the linguistic sense) pioneers, not contaminated by the gutter speech of the gangsters, or by the too facile, weak dilutions of upper-class society,—those more swiftly moving tides that flow up and down the choked channels of urban thoroughfares. To a person caring for language uses as such, this Chapman book will be a delight, quite aside from the fact that it is good fiction.

This valuable addition in the United States to our general word powers, through the localisms I am referring to, is of course paralleled in England, and long has been, by the works of writers like Hardy, Philpotts, Sheila Kaye Smith,—to mention

but three at random, where a host will come to mind,—valiant exploiters of the different dialects and sections of the little land that yet shows an astonishing variation in speech use when once you go outside polite London.

An inadvisable conservatism toward these welcome innovations might be shown by some on the ground that the language thus ejected into the general speech was too recent to get dictionary recognition. A plain word may be said about that. Concerning dictionaries it should be understood that frequently words and idioms get into common use, yet are not registered in a lexicon for the simple reason that such uses are ahead of the dictionary or may be too obscure to have cognizance of them spread fast. Those who imagine that unless a word is in the dictionary it must be illegitimate fail to grasp an important fact: that a dictionary is not static, but a changing chronicle of use, and therefore always a little if not far behind the actual wont of language. It can not be otherwise. The greatest dictionary in the tongue, Doctor Murray's *New English Dictionary,* has taken two whole generations to make, and is even now not quite completed. As a result, words freshly considered when the dictionary began its work are now passé, almost obsolete in some instances. And, still more, words now and for

some time in daily use—and by no means to be rejected—are not as yet chronicled in that or any other lexicon. If a good dictionary could be made within a given year, then it would contain the language of almost the very moment; but as it is, and has to be always, any dictionary that is able to include even quite recent words and idioms is doing all that can be asked of it. The omission of such—this is the point I am making—is not an adverse judgment at all, necessarily. To illustrate: you will not find the word *wise-crack,* it is safe to say, in any American dictionary to-day. Yet all who read the New York papers and follow dramatic criticism, know well that *wise-crack, wise-crackers,* those who make the wise-cracks (or humorsome slangy bits of dialogue in the accent of the instant), have been perfectly familiar for some time as current use. And so on, with instances innumerable. The question that settles it is never merely: "How recent is it?" but, rather: "Is it a good, needed, legitimate coinage?" Any day, some new word or phrase may spring into use, or at least be a favorable candidate for acceptance, because of obvious fitness, the filling of a real need. In a current idiom, "It doesn't click," obviously born of our machine age, the recent birth should not blind us to its felicity. There is no reason whatever to avoid a new word as if it had a contagious disease, a point

amplified in the discussion of slang. This leads up to my final point.

The crying up of the new importations, fresh and vital, from the so-called primitive or simpler strata of society, to feed the stale talk in those other strata making up polite society, must not be confused with the too ready acceptance of the low lingo always to be heard where there is sophistication without true culture, and a veneer of manners with no morals beneath. Current idiom is constantly being added to from the word-ways of cabarets, night-clubs and such like haunts of fashion and vice. The language picked up in purlieus of gangsters smells of its origin, and the smell is not pleasant. Half of the new coinages, particularly in the towns, where such conversation naturally has its genesis and habitat, are nothing but an encroachment upon the welcome, legitimate idiom of English speech. Occasionally, to be sure, some picturesque addition to the storehouse of linguistic power may come from such a source. The assertion has been illustrated on previous pages. Exactly as we welcome some person suffering in his birth from a parentage not only humble but low, who yet climbs up into a position of power and service, so we may welcome any word that in the same fashion rises in the world, because it is of worth and attraction. The word *pal* was of

that sort of origin, but it has long since been deodorized into a pleasant example of the vernacular. But for the most part all speech thus born dies an early death, and deserves it. There is in the people at large, who generate and control language, a sort of healthy instinct in the long run for what is worthy; so that although gutter speech exists and always will exist, the main current of English for ever tends to flow clearly, leaving its alluvial deposits where they belong—at the bottom.

The purpose of this chapter has been to justify a receptive attitude toward localisms that contribute something distinctive, something good, to the word-hoard; we need not be frightened when, as so often happens, the birth seems humble, plebeian, far away from the cultured centers where elegance, fashion, correctness (above all, correctness!)—as well as fads and follies—do commonly disport themselves. Let me return to a thought before expressed: language is of democratic begetting, and those democratic sources are of steady influence, feeders of our words and idioms, needed correctives of the outworn locutions which they come to displace. The politician is pictured as keeping his ear to the ground to catch the will of the people; no less, the lover of words must also bend his down to mother-earth, for thence come the creative impulses that keep all tongues alive.

CHAPTER XXI

SOME TRAITS OF BIBLE DICTION

WHAT is termed English Literature, meaning the collective work of all the important writers who have used English as a medium, has a long and memorable record. Its bead-roll of worthies is an impressive one, the mere chanting of the stellar names having both majesty and music in their implication: Chaucer and Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, Browning and Tennyson, Carlyle and Ruskin, Thackeray, Dickens and George Eliot, Lamb and Stevenson; and the Americans, Hawthorne and Emerson, Lowell and Poe, Mark Twain and Whitman,—these are but a few of the spectacular many. Yet the most striking paradox in all the annals of our justly literary creative effort in Letters is to be found in the fact, conceded by all scholars worthy of the name, that when we would point to the chief monument of English idiom it is not any one of these literary immortals we must mention first, not even Shakespeare himself, but

the Book commonly called the Holy Bible in that version known as the Authorized or King James, dating from the year 1611 and hence over three hundred years behind us. And this, although it is not an original English document but a translation out of several foreign tongues, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and the work not of one author but of some forty, covering centuries of time, very loosely bound together in the Scriptures which so long were regarded as exclusively a religious book, that the unique literary value of the collection was hardly realized. Now, however, when we wish to show English idiom at its best and most representative, we perforce turn to the King James Version of the Bible, knowing that the fifty translators, lay and clerical, who wrought for long on this great translation and brought it to completion on that historic date in the seventeenth century, under the reign of the first James of the Stuart house, performed a miracle. Their miracle was that of converting these valuable religious documents into English "to be understanded of the people," and to give us for all time not only the finest rendering into English speech of the Bible, but an incomparable example of this speech at its strongest, sweetest and most characteristically Anglo-Saxon for spirit and mode of communication.

John Ruskin, one of the few truly great prose

masters of English, declared in a famous passage of his autobiography that he read through the Scriptures twice a year, at his mother's knee; and he adds that he owes to that "maternal installation in the Scriptures" the best part of all he became as a writer. He declares that, thus early brought into vital realization of the best in English expression, he could never in later life put up contentedly with second-best writing. Henry Newbolt, the poet, remarks on the similarity of his prose style with that of the Hebrew prophets, Amos and Isaiah, especially in respect of its rhythmic qualities. That experience with Bible diction as a boy, surely left indelible marks on the author of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* as indeed it has upon countless other of the standard writers whose work makes our English list a proud one to recite. Ruskin's testimony is thus but one of many.

It is safe to say that any youth who in the formative period of expression spends his days and nights with the Bible, so that its movement and music, its savor and idiomatic tang get into his blood, can never go far astray from that splendid norm of speech, nor descend to indifference concerning the lower ways of expression so current always as to be false beacons luring into bogs and byways one who seeks the straight path. And if it be our desire to

make any assertion as to effective English, what is native and vernacular, idiomatic and full of the instinctive qualities of the English language, the best we can do is to illustrate and make cogent our statements by reference to the examples with which the Authorized Version teems. If one, for example, be interested in fiction, and would wish to study story telling as a form, let him give attention to the story of Joseph and his brethren, in Genesis, and see how justly it is called one of the masterpieces of the short story in world-literature. If this be not apparent, try to better it by subtraction or addition, especially in its crucial moments, as where Joseph makes himself known to his brothers, or that subsequent picture of Joseph's father, old Jacob, coming down from his own farm country to see, after a lifetime of believing him dead, his dearly beloved son risen to power, chief statesman of Pharaoh; and Joseph greeting him with loving arms, proud that his sire may witness his success. It is so richly human, so dramatic, and above all so incomparably told, that the blood begins to move even at this bald reference to it.

However, caution is necessary. In indicating the matchless worth of the King James Version, direct imitation of its style is not for a moment meant or advised. As everybody knows who reads

it (and it is by far the best-read book in the tongue) the Bible contains archaisms, its manner of expression is at times obsolescent or obsolete, and to produce it in modern style with its *thous* and *thees* and *sayeths* and *goeths* would be anything but advisable. Indeed, humorists of questionable taste have for the sake of cheap laughs done this very thing—and got the laughs. But in a deep sense, nevertheless, the Bible does remain a model: the finest principles of style, the best ways of saying things in English, are represented in its diction; ways and principles that are not for a day but for as long as good English shall flourish on the earth. It may not be amiss to mention three or four of these, in this chapter, in order to make plain what is in mind when such high claims for the Bible as a literary monument are made by those who have at heart the welfare of the English language. For, let us not forget, this thought about Bible influence regarded as expression, as literature, bears directly and significantly upon the vital question of the place of the Bible in popular education, a reference to which has been made earlier in this book.

First among the qualities to be noted in Bible style is simplicity. It is well known that a comparison of the style of Shakespeare with that of the Bible reveals that the percentage of native words in the

latter is remarkably large; the make-up of the diction of Shakespeare, the greatest single contributor to English literature, has to a far greater degree an infusion of words derived from the foreign tongues. The fact illustrates what every sensitive reader of the Bible, with manner of speech in mind, must perceive: the predominantly vernacular flavor of the style. Both in vocabulary and its use as idiom, the language of the Old and New Testament, wrought out of the Elizabethan English that was Shakespeare's speech and that of his mighty contemporaries, is of superbly Anglo-Saxon quality and texture. And this is but another way of saying that simplicity is one of its shining virtues. Why not, since native words and ways are those by which the deepest effects are always secured? The Bible diction does not make the mistake referred to elsewhere in speaking of Freeman's style. It so merges the Latinistic elements of language with the native words as to leave the latter dominant. Always the native words form the substratum of style, and an atmosphere is thus created echoing with true English reverberations. It is thus that Bible diction best represents the genius of the English tongue. There is none to gainsay the statement.

The second quality of the Bible speech to make it admirable and memorable is closely allied with the

first: sincerity. When a writer, any writer indeed, becomes self-conscious, strives for literary results, worries over the manner of expression, his style suffers accordingly. Sometimes, very beautiful effects follow this conscious and mannered attempt to be "different," to give personal flavor to styles,—it were foolish to deny it. The way of the brothers Goncourt in French literature, the manner of a Mallarmé or later of a Proust means genuine addition to expressional excellence. Or, thinking of English literature, the personal touch of a Walter Pater, a George Moore or a George Meredith in one of his eccentric moods, belongs with the conscious styles that nevertheless win a place in literary annals. But the greatest effects of all are not thus attained, but rather by the sincerity that implies an author who, whatever his manner and the result of his attempt, is not taken up fussily with how he does it, but absorbed in *what* he does, never allowing his way of attaining it to get in the way of the more important thing, the conveyance of his thought and feeling. Such writers have their eye on the ball,—to borrow from golf. It is as fortunate a fact as can be mentioned in the study of English Letters that the translators of the Bible in the Authorized Version were not thinking primarily of their style, but of bringing the word of God to all sorts and conditions

of men. They made great literature in so doing exactly because they were not trying to be literary. They never ask you to notice how they do it. They ask you to behold the things of the Kingdom and be profited thereby. Hence, the sincerity of their utterance, with the simplicity which is a sure companion of sincerity, becomes a distinguishing trait of their splendid accomplishment.

The third characteristic of the Bible style to which I would draw attention as explaining its place and power, is what I shall call its reality. Sincerity and simplicity in unison, produce a concreteness that gives to the utterance that inescapable reality. You feel that words used with such sharp definiteness are talking about real things. Nowhere else, turn wherever you may, in the annals of literature shall you find such an extraordinary instinct for the close fitting of word to thought, such a gift for making word and thought blend in unity of effect. Real words expressing real things, that is what the reader feels, and the reality of the thing comes from the realness, the concreteness, the earth-warm individuality of the word itself. All the more noteworthy is this reality of Bible style, as I venture to call it, because, broadly speaking, the subject-matter of the Book deals with abstractions, although, of course, they are realities of the mind and soul; but

not of the senses and the physical aspects of human life. In view of its theme, this Bible diction might naturally have fallen into the ponderosities of metaphysics, the dialectic hair-splittings that demand a form of expression—witness Kant—far removed from the bosom interests and passions of men, and couched therefore in a lumbering vehicle of polysyllabic language. The words used by philosophers to convey their meaning are anathema to all but specialists. On the contrary, the Bible's way is as appealingly popular as one of Mother Goose's rhymes or Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tales. It is this concreteness of expression that gives the peculiar homespun quality to Bible diction, making it loved by the common people, and easily finding permanent lodging in their affectionate memory. In reading the Bible, one is continually impressed by the fact that its writers are not persons aloof, unlike other human beings, removed in their manner of life from the ordinary exchanges that bring men together, but, rather, like unto ourselves in the bosom interests and passions of mankind, having the homely experiences that bind all men in the common bond of loving, living, suffering. The reality of the message draws on this effect. We prate to-day in literary circles, wearisomely, about "realism," too often meaning over-attention to the small, the low and the disgust-

ing. For realism in the larger, finer sense, no book since has excelled the Book of Books.

The fourth and final characteristic of the diction of the Bible I would emphasize, is its unequaled sense of the sound values of English expression. We now know, as we did not so well know until parts of the Bible began to be printed in our own day in verse, as they should be, that the Bible contains as great poetry as has ever been produced by any nation in human history. Such Old Testament books as Job, the Song of Solomon and the Psalms are poetry in a double sense: imaginative utterance of the finest kind, and also definitely poetic in form, to be distinguished from prose for that, among other reasons. But here is a curious matter. Bible diction, whether prose or poetry on its formal side (I refer, of course, to the original Hebrew), possesses such poetic qualities at its best that we might almost ignore the division between the two and say that the magnificently rhythmic writing of the Scriptures everywhere made the Authorized Version foremost among literary monuments of the peoples. The Hebrew parallelism, that is to say, the repetition of thought in altered expression as it occurs in successive rhythmic sentences, so that clause kisses clause as in our English poetry rhyme kisses rhyme, and music mounts ever higher as the duplication goes on, is

unique, in the exact implication of the word, in all the vast accomplishments of literature. Thus the Bible dares to adopt the musical method of poetry though it frequently remains prose in the technical sense, and may be so printed to the eye. Richard Moulton is right when, in his *Modern Readers' Bible,* he allows the language, which has attained the element and sound of poetry, as in the incomparable little lyric uttered by Ruth to Naomi, "Intreat me not to leave thee," to appear as verse in contradistinction from the foregoing prose narrative out of which it arises. It conveys the fact that, although in original Hebrew that exquisite poem may not have been so printed, the passage is, in effect and quality, true song. This saliency of language comes finely into play in the method, so typical throughout the Scriptures, of dramatic representation. The Bible, in telling its manifold story from the shaping of earth to the Crucifixion, is nothing if not dramatic,—as all familiar with its story-telling are aware. And by this very concreteness, this stark reality of word and figure of speech, it secures its dramatic effect, for nowhere so truly as in the drama does terseness of expression suit itself to immediacy of deed.

I referred to the use of the Bible in education, and have said that the virtue of the vernacular, native English serenely at work, can be seen in this

mighty collection of writings happily embodied in the Authorized Version, as in no other monument of English literature. The inference is plain, logical, irresistible. In this respect, its utility for education can not be exaggerated or overestimated. And this will remain true however much its ancient authority, as a repository of outgrown ethics or a theology that was for the day and not for all time, may change in modern teaching. It will always be, and should be so regarded now and used in accordance with that idea, the chief cultural book of the English-speaking peoples. For such noble expression, so in harmony with the genius of the tongue, can have no date. It would be well if in our public educational system of school and college that fact were more consistently and generally acted upon.

CHAPTER XXII

"THE FINEST TONGUE"

IN THE conscious struggle to attain to a worthy instrument of expression, on the part of the nations, as well as individuals, two aims have always clashed: the attempt to make some individual language as distinctive as possible, and most clearly distinguishable as best among human tongues; and the attempt to bring all tongues together in some sort of non-existent world-language which shall remove the national barriers and make all mankind brothers in the possession of a medium which can be used anywhere on the face of the earth.

The former desire and purpose are shown when scholars cry up the speech of some country, Germany, England, France, whatever it may be, with the notion that in both its nature and world-history it is peculiarly fitted to become the dominant language, destined at last to be a sort of linguistic viaticum to carry one making use of it around the globe, grad-

ually absorbing the less adaptable tongues, and proudly taking the primary place that it deserves, through the discomfiture of the sister tongues once claiming and more or less getting their place in the sun. The latter aim, not centering on any one language, but devising a speech not at present used at all, and coming into existence through the ingenious invention of scholars, results in such attempts as Volapük, Esperanto and still later inventions: a speech to be learned by all concerned, as one learns something in school. Such a language would be based on a clever use of phonetics whereby symbols of thought can be represented by words equally unknown, and to be acquired by intellectual effort, with the same difficulty always present when a person sits down to acquire some tongue not his own. Of all such attempts, so far, it may be said that they have hardly passed the stage of ingenious curiosities, having their adherents, to be sure, and active in propaganda, but nevertheless offering immense unlikelihood that they will ever be adopted by more than the learned few, while the peoples at large go right on using, and gladly, the speech of the fatherland.

But the object of the present chapter is to draw attention to the opposite tendency: that which has always existed among the nations, and is part of the

instinct for self-realization and supremacy. It is seen in the claim, cropping up from time to time, and probably never to be completely stilled at least in argument and arrogant desire: the claim that this tongue or that is by nature destined to become so dominant, in process of time, that it will at last conquer all others and become in reality, as well as in boast, the finest, most universally acceptable speech for mankind. Our own tongue, English, has again and again been put forward as such a language, as has German, or French. Books have been written in which plenty of proof has been submitted, leading to such conclusion. Even as I write there comes to hand the latest example, in a volume entitled *Our Oral Word as Social and Economic Factor,* by Margaret De Witt, the thesis of which, connecting with an earlier book by the same author, declares, "It is the manifest destiny of the English language to become the medium of world intercourse."

Therefore, the question is: "Can English, in the light of its history and its present status among the nations, justly lay claim to such a proud eventuality?" Obviously, to answer it with any intelligence, one must know thoroughly not only English in its history and use to-day, but, as well, other leading languages like French and German. And also must one be able to take a world view quite

detached from the partisanship natural to one who loves his mother-tongue and believes in the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon stock. It sounds like a counsel of perfection! However, endeavoring as best we may to approach the problem in the spirit of broad-minded acceptance of the facts, it can at once be said that undoubtedly English has some strong claims to be regarded as the tongue favored by Fate in eventually occupying the first place. Its literature, for one thing, stands so high among the creative efforts of the nations in Letters that a reference to it is in itself an argument. One world figure like Shakespeare makes the speech he used a claimant for honors; and his name is but one in an impressive roster of literary "immortals," as we like to dub them. Such literature carries English not only far over space, but down the centuries of time, spreading the news of what the tongue can do for eloquent expression. The literary testimony, by itself, establishes English as a rival with the speech of all other peoples who have a literate place in the world.

Beside this claim, we may well set the other which looks to the far-flung influence of English, spoken throughout North America, in the States and Canada, spoken likewise in all the colonial possessions of the British folk, even permeating to a certain extent the Orient where English sway makes

it at least the tongue of diplomacy and, in part, of education. It is not necessary to fall back on statistics which so often seem the last resort of those whose argument is weak, but it is enough to assert that many millions speak the English language, and that the vast number will increase, logically, as time goes on, dominion extends, and trade draws together the scattered myriads of men, all over the civilized globe. Daniel Webster's famous figure about the English drum-beat being heard around the globe, applies more, not less, to the present situation. If English be not to-day a world language, it might not be erratic to deduce from what is, what will be, in the course of time, given the same law of accomplishment and progress. Moreover, if we look directly at the nature of English, as a tongue among other tongues, it can be asserted with little fear of contradiction that it is a language of masculine powers, a Germanic speech in derivation having the vigor the word implies, capable of producing effects wherein strength blends with music, and the rugged Anglo-Saxon backbone of its framework is clothed with a sonorous beauty largely borrowed from the Greek, Latin and other foreign sources. Nobody who knows whereof he speaks would ever dream of calling English a weak, undistinguishable tongue, or one in the slightest degree imitative or closely par-

alleled; an echo rather than a voice. Its resonant resources are too well known to need defense.

But in fairness, we must adduce still other facts, which, when placed beside these enumerated for the argument in favor of English, qualify its complete acceptance, and indeed give us pause while we ask if another advocate, taking the side of another nation, might not make as good a showing for his cause.

The French tongue, for instance, has long been and still is the language of society, the language which confessedly will aid a traveler to go about the earth's surface with ease and understanding more than any other tongue we can name. If we cared frankly to ask ourselves: "What is, of them all, the language of civilization, the tongue which, ever since the Middle Ages when Latin was in its place, best serves to bring civilized men into satisfactory social relations?" Must we not in honesty reply, "French"? It is no accident that that tongue is preferably used, over English, German or Italian, when diplomats and courtiers get together for the exchange of international thought. We might say that politesse compels a working knowledge of the speech of France, wherever one finds oneself; it is part of social convenance.

True, French, because the nation using it is a

less colonial people than the English, is not carried so far over the earth as is the latter. Still, the colonial possessions in Africa and elsewhere give it no inconsiderable vogue in the East, and any one who lives in New York or is a visitor there is aware how the tongue of France has domesticated itself long since on this side of the water. And when it comes to the literary test, it is not to be denied that France again has its strong claim. If English has its Shakespeare, French has its Molière. Such names as Rabelais, Racine, Corneille, Voltaire, Molière, Balzac and Victor Hugo bulk formidable in any international contest, and to match them with names of equal importance of English origin drives us to our guns. In general, French literature is so rich in stellar personalities that any other nation is lucky to keep abreast of the competition. If then, counting noses, it may be granted that more people speak English than French, it will be well to concede that in literature and in social exchange French is a worthy rival of English or any other tongue. To which it is only fair to add that the language has a rare ability to express with exactitude, elegance and point the nice shades of meaning, and the subtler differentiations of human thought, so that even the language of its philosophers (often with the Germans and English heavy and obscure) has the clarity,

grace and charm that give it wider circulation among the trained readers and make it a part of belles-lettres. In reading a modern, like Bergson, you are reading not only philosophy but also literature. Wit, epigram, aphorism and axiom, these have never been found more happily expressed in any other speech, past or present.

And likewise, there is something to say for that Germanic tongue, the German, a blood relative of English, and in many respects characterized by the same qualities: rugged vigor, strength that unites with the softer effects of melody, harmony that derives from the tonal manipulations of a tongue virile and to-day showing no signs of decadence. It is important to recognize, in comparing English and German directly, that the German, because of less mixture of the Renaissance elements of culture, with Latin and Greek influences dominant, has, more than its sister tongue, retained the Old English vigor of earlier days. English has gained by the introduction of the foreign elements, but it has also lost a certain native strength, where this is not true of German.

And once more, the literary test is not wholly to the disadvantage of the tongue of the Niebelungen, the brothers Grimm, Schiller and Goethe, Heine and an additional galaxy of writers who are as internationally known as the English worthies to whom

we point with pride. In the best German authors certain traits are to be detected not easy to describe but of a quality to make it but the part of sound criticism to say that no translation into our own speech can do them justice. Try, for example, to render in English Heine's *Du Bist wie eine Blume,* and see how surely its fragrance departs. Turn Wagner's *Niebelungen* into English, and realize how heavy-footed and uninspired it seems. Why is it that when a singer would give the *lieder* of Schubert or Schumann, he must retain the native German, or lose the evanescent charm of the original? The English equivalent always seems tame and prosaic. German is a great tongue and its literature is best proof of it. When we think of the speech for social purpose, why deny that there is something peculiarly *heimlich* as the Germans have it, in their use of language that penetrates to the heart and stands for hearth and home? The lines,

> *"Wo mein Hertz und mein Lieb' ist,*
> *Da bin ich zu Haus,"*

(Where my heart and my love is, there am I at home), typify a familiar attitude and sentiment, and the words in the original can not quite be transcribed. This peculiar home-like quality of the tongue, comes out beautifully in the verb *heim-suchen,* which, in its

extended meaning, signifies death; as if to say, to die is to go to one's final home.

As for the German tongue looked at as a widely used organ of expression and the vehicle for one of the leading races, it can be said that more folk speak English than German, and moreover, that since the World War we are less likely to call Germany a nation at the fore of European civilization. Yet, striving still to be perfectly just, it must be declared that commercially, and for the purposes of culture, the Germans are, and will long continue to be, a people whose accomplishment, power, significance in any reckoning with the nations, one is compelled to place high in a candid estimate. Therefore, the speech of such a people, will be one of the dominant speeches. For a dominant people always means a dominant speech; it is an important part of their self-expression and self-assertion.

These examples from German and French are perhaps enough to illustrate the opinion I wish to set down. It would be easy to speak further of the still uninjured power of the Russian language, and to point, illustratively, to Pushkin, Tolstoy, Turgenief, Dostoievsky, as mighty bearers of the Slav banner, wresting mighty results out of that leonine tongue. Nor were it amiss to speak of Norwegian, with an Ibsen seizing on the folk speech and making it

resound to his plastic use as he placed himself as the greatest dramatist of modern literature. Think, too, of the claim, as far as expression in creative authorship can establish it, properly to be made by that liquid language in which Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy,* and, in our own time, in which D'Annunzio has shown himself a mage of music. Think of Swedish, too, called the Italian of the North, with Strindberg's strange genius to give it prominence in modern Letters. The moment one takes in the whole territory, it will be seen how the story swells, and claimants arise on every hand. But, as I said, sufficient detail has been put forward to suggest the conclusion.

Even in the light of an outline sketch, it would seem rational to say that English should be content to be one of the few dominant tongues, of which French, German and Italian are others, if we stop with them, wide-spread in its influence, honorable and noble in its accomplishment, vigorous in its quality, and with a remarkable record behind it, and a great future in store for it,—while yet neither exclusive in its achievement, nor alone as against other claimants in possessing those qualities which eliminate all rivalry. To go further than this, is to substitute personal preference or bias for the strict truth on the basis of a careful and candid scrutiny of

history and a comprehensive survey of existing conditions. It should suffice for those who use and love the English language that its record is so fine, its power so wide-spread and flourishing. It can do certain things, as has been demonstrated in various chapters of this book, not within the scope of any other tongue. But let it be added, although it may seem anti-climactic, other tongues in their turn do certain things not within the ability of English. Thus, honors are easy,—and this should be enough to satisfy national pride, and at the same time tend to make us cautious in too easily swallowing the pompous assertions about English as indisputably a world language.

CHAPTER XXIII

THAT TYRANT, THE DICTIONARY

BLIND worship of the dictionary is as dangerous as worship of a tribal god. There are several reasons why this is so. For one, it is commonly overlooked that there are dictionaries and dictionaries, that selection is necessary, since lexicons may be good, bad or indifferent, as it happens. Yet the tendency to regard any such work as sacrosanct is so widespread as to be well-nigh universal.

For another reason, it is too often assumed that a dictionary, if reputable, is static, and embraces the last word on this matter of language. True enough, it may (at its best) speak the latest wise word in its field. But, as I have been at pains to point out earlier, even the most impeccable dictionary has to bow to the law of change, since it takes years to make it, and since language is a fluent, ever-shifting thing, so that the dictionary on its appearance can only report the facts up to the time of its publication—

and not even that, because the work done upon it may antedate its appearance by months, or years.

In any proper use of such a work, therefore, it will be well to bear in mind that there is as much difference in its excellence as is true of any other work by the hand of man; and that, at the very best, the dictionary is subject to the fluctuations, omissions and innocent limitations of labor executed over a period of time, with its materials as well subject to the fact that, because it is vital, it is also protean, a kaleidoscope of continual reshapings. Although the greatest experts may have wrought upon it, and only they, there will always be this restriction upon infallibility. The first important question, then, when we would have it at elbow for daily use, is: What of its trustworthiness relative to other dictionaries?

It may be said as a generalization, that any dictionary which applies the best modern scholarship to the business of spelling, defining, giving the etymology and pronunciation of English words is a good dictionary. But aside from the expense and handiness of the volume (or volumes), practical considerations not to be overlooked, an American using such a help will prefer a work of American manufacture, not as a booster of home goods, as the salesman would express it, but simply because

in British dictionaries there is a tendency to minimize the American contribution to the tongue, and sometimes to treat it condescendingly as not only minor but negligible.

Let it be said, with this in mind, that three dictionaries of home make, all encyclopedic in character, are good: *Webster,* the *Standard* and the *Century.* Yet discrimination between them is in order. Webster's is the oldest and most famous. In the past, Noah Webster's book has been in some sort a household possession, having an authority in its field like to that of the Bible in religion. To doubt it was lese-majesty. By tradition, it is still so revered, especially with the older generation. But the publishers for long traded on the fact, and allowed its scholarship to remain that of the middle nineteenth century, while the lusty young science of English philology steadily advanced, and other dictionaries kept abreast of the times. Finally, under the compulsion of competition, Webster's was re-edited and brought up to modern demands; the *Webster's New International* is satisfactory. For many years, nevertheless, it changed its title-page rather than its scholarship. Of the two others, the *Standard* and the *Century,* while both are well made, the *Standard* is more progressive in certain respects: for example, in the matter of pronuncia-

tion, it leans to the latest facts, where the other inclines to be old-fashioned. Let me illustrate: my father said *demónstrate,* whereas I, the son, say *démonstrate.* The older generation gave it the accent indicated, while the younger, following the law of recessive accent elsewhere touched on, brought the accent forward to the first syllable. Hence, a sound dictionary will give as the preferred accent that of the present generation, with the older accent secondary, both properly enough indicated in the order described. To stick to the older *demónstrate* is not so much wrong as inaccurate, because it does not represent the later usage. The *Standard* will be found to recognize this change, placing *démonstrate* first, with *demónstrate* as second choice. Not so the *Century.* Again, the *Standard* introduces a valuable, commonsensible feature in giving the definition at once after the word itself, and relegating the learned etymological matter (always hitherto printed directly after the word) to a subordinate place below. As the many want definitions and only the few etymology, this is an excellent idea.

But considering these three works, all encyclopedic in contents and costing a comparatively large sum, it may truthfully be said that any family having one of them on its reading table will do very well in the desired assistance in linguistics. The recently

appearing *Winston Simplified Dictionary,* encyclopedic edition, reduced in size and price, will also be found to be a portable, handsome and reliable work of its kind.

In another connection, I mention the *Oxford New English Dictionary,* Doctor Murray being its first editor, as the greatest lexicographic feat of our era. It is of vast sweep, represents the soundest cooperative knowledge of its period, and may be regarded as the final court of appeal in all questions touching our speech. It does one thing never before attempted: the quotation adjoined to represent each word embodies the first use of the word in the tongue. Thus, at a glance, you can tell how long the word has existed in English. One's head fairly reels in imagining the amount of skilled, patient labor on the part of specialists such a contribution implies. Five thousand trained workers are said to have assisted Doctor Murray and the later editor, Mr. Bradley, in their mammoth task. The *New English Dictionary* means to be fair to the American contribution, but hardly does the subject justice. It is printed, necessarily, in many volumes, and so is a library work of reference, not a handy, practicable book in the home.

The authoritative work, if one is after etymology, is Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary.* The sound of that scholar's name has a ring to it that makes all

philologists doff their hats at a mere mention. But for the layman, the outstanding facts can be succinctly expressed in saying that any one of the four American books enumerated will prove sufficient for a native of these shores—with a knowledge in the background of the *New English Dictionary,* in cases of special emergency. One thought, of use in any and all contacts with the lexicographers, calls for a little further dilation.

Man was not made for the dictionary, but the dictionary for man. There is immense qualitative difference between the various books, and here, as elsewhere, the good books are few. It is the business of a good dictionary to collect, arrange and report on the facts. Put it this way: a word is not spelled so-and-so, nor pronounced so-and-so, nor does it derive from a stated source because a dictionary says so; the dictionary says so (if trustworthy, an important If) because the historic facts accord with its statement. In other words, a lexicon does not make the laws, but chronicles them. If it reports them wrong, it is not the best dictionary, nor to be trusted nor used as if it had authority. If this simple idea be once grasped, it will slay that ignorant approach to any dictionary no matter how poor, as if the Delphic oracle had spoken, so that thereafter,

"let no dog open his mouth."

Ignorantly, blindly consulted, the dictionary is in sooth a tyrant. Even so, it may be a benevolent one on occasion and, like a Mussolini, do its countrymen some good. But always it is necessary to discriminate between good and bad lexicons and equally necessary to remember that one cognizant of the complete history of words may be able to dispute the dictionary statement, and to set it right.

To think of the dictionary in its practical utility, a very pleasant thing in time of trouble, draws special attention to the detail of spelling. For surely most people turn to it for that purpose, comparatively few for definition and pronunciation, and still fewer, it may be premised, for etymology. As of immediate moment, then, to the majority, something may be said about the first of these three forms of information, orthography. To be able to spell right is certainly a convenience, since civilized society agrees to judge culture, among other tests, by one's accuracy in writing down words. Yet it is largely a convention, after all, for the farther back we go in time, the more seemingly careless we find the socially elect in their manner of spelling. There is truth in Artemas Ward's humorous remark that "Chaucer was an ingenious cuss, but he couldn't spell." Even

a slight acquaintance with the orthography of the past serves to show the general lack of agreement among educated folk in this matter. They appear to spell temperamentally, rather than consistently: the same man did not hesitate to spell a word half a dozen ways, if he felt like it. This is true of Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, and scores of nobles and notables; we are not talking of the common rabble. Such a helter-skelter tendency leads a modern thinker like Bertrand Russell to say in his *Sceptical Essays* that "there is no point whatever in being able to spell anything. Shakespeare and Milton could not spell; Marie Corelli and Alfred Austen could." The iconoclastic satire of this will be relished by many who have groaned over their own orthographic defects since school-days.

Of course, the explanation of it all is, that in earlier times people aimed primarily at conveying the sound of the word, and cared less about the appearance of it. We need to remind ourselves here that printing only came in with the fifteenth century, so that the preservation of words for the eye is but a comparatively recent thing. Before that historic event, which did so much to change human thought and advance civilization, a person in writing a word endeavored to make it look as it sounded, that is, tried to be phonetic. And inasmuch as the same

word, pronounced variously by the speaker, or heard in various parts of the country, had a variant sound, the writer of it not unnaturally indicated this by a different spelling. Or, striving to come closer to its phonetic value than when he wrote down the same word before, he might, on a second trial, use other letters. For he did not have the corrective of the printed form to challenge his attempt.

Printing, then, standardized spelling, while before it came, usage looked with lenient eye upon personal variations. There is a superabundance of testimony to prove this. At present, in contrast, it is the business of education and culture to spell correctly, as it is called, which is to say, to normalize spelling so that it shall not indulge in the chameleon-like changes of the past. And as a result, dictionaries become dingy and thumb-worn by the trembling souls who, inheriting the elder instinct to spell phonetically, would yet conform with the present sterner demands. Certainly one of the dictionary's main reasons for existence can be discovered just here, as first aid to the linguistically injured, for it must be obvious to all who listen to public spelling matches, or note the orthography of private correspondence within their own circle, that humanity has an ineradicable tendency to wabble when it is a question of the accepted way to spell anything.

The reason is not far to seek; indeed, it has already been implied. We are all phonetic creatures, preferring to make the sound of a word agree with the way it is written down. But, alas, for what has happened! The moment the printed form begins to conserve spelling, the trouble starts, and exactly for this reason, English to-day is one of the worst spelled tongues used on this earth, in fact, a hodge-podge of inconsistencies; another way of saying that the sound and the writing down of the sound largely disagree. But let it never be forgotten, they did agree once. If you are looking for a scapegoat to blame it on, choose the art of printing.

The modern disagreement I speak of is the wherefore of such an organization as the Simplified Spelling Board, which exists as a group of scholars to help, however mildly and gradually, to bring about a closer agreement between the spoken and written word, in spite of their long divorce because of the increasing domination of the printed page. Under the influence of this society, be it noted, a few simple betterments have been introduced. Some educated people write *thot* for *thought, thoro* for *thorough*, and the like, and some periodicals have accepted the ten words proposed by the Board and so printed them. The basal argument for simplified spelling is a good one. Older words were once

spelled in a certain way and so pronounced. We retain the spelling, but have changed the pronunciation. Why not then normalize the spelling to make it agree with the present sound of the word,—just as once was true? We spell it *thought*, for instance, but pronounce it *thot*. Why should not sound and lettering get together? Fundamentally, spelling is but a device to represent the way a word sounds. All spelling in its genesis is phonetic; no fact is surer than that. You can not imagine any one originally writing down the sound of a word with letters that did not at least aim to stand for the sound. Therefore, you may be sure that when, at the present time, you run across a word like *bough*, although the way we say it is represented by the word *bow*, the guttural sound indicated by the *gh* in it was pronounced once upon a time.

To mention one more argument favoring these attempts at improving the later-day orthography: it is known to those who have learning in the premises, that often the modern spelling of a sound that does not agree with it, obscures the etymological facts, although contrariwise it is often urged that the proposed Josh Billings style of spelling would wipe out the etymology which gives us our knowledge of the historic past. The objection is not valid. We write the word *rhyme*, for example, by a false

analogy with the Greek word *rhythm,* when the true English way of writing the word is *rime*—and it was so long written. Logically, the scholars who advocate simplified spelling have a good argument here on their side. But they have one thing against them, which, I imagine, will be an insuperable hurdle to overleap: namely, esthetics.

When words so long spelled the modern accepted way are clothed in phonetic garb, the result, in spite of us, is an incongruous humorous effect. To bring this forcibly to realization, take any serious poem you love and dress it in phonetic garments. The effect is ludicrous. Words, say what we will, take on for the eye and so for the feeling a traditional fitness, and to disturb this, in any serious setting where an esthetic impression is desired, is disastrous. There is something fatally comic about the eye-picture thus secured, and the esthetic mood, the mood sought by the presence of beauty, is destroyed. This is why humorists so frequently depend on uncouth spellings as an element in the mirth they would evoke. Logically, theoretically, we *ought* to welcome these innovations, for they only strive to use an orthography which fits the word as it is now spoken. But—and we may regret it—spelling, as part of language-making in general, is not logical and reasoned out, but spontaneous, inconsistent, full of contradictions,

tumbled white-hot into the world, as faulty as are the men who make it. And always when we spell *enuff* as we pronounce it (and hence should spell it) it will, I am afraid, seem like bringing the barnyard into the beautiful grounds in front of the house. One is forced to be skeptical at its ever being done with success. There is a fine argument for better, which is to say, phonetic spelling, in the fact that we now make children learn arbitrarily, not rationally, that the *gh* in *thought* is silent: they are too young to be satisfied by the historic fact that once the *gh* was sounded. So we compel them in this instance and in countless hundreds of others, to store in their heads by a feat of memory what is really a strange, seemingly senseless, thing which ought to be explained, that their pupil days in language might be made the smoother. Yet, in the light of what has been pointed out, and human nature as expressed in its spelling habits being what it is, I fear we must ask them to blunder along and put up with, not without lamentation, the queer orthographic freaks so inwrought in the history of our speech.

A dictionary rightly understood can be converted from a tyrant into an interesting, helpful friend, when once we have learned to discriminate between the good and bad, and have grasped the thought that a good one is only the humble servitor of man, who

made the dictionary possible by inventing several hundred thousand words composing it. And not only a friend helpful, but veritably fascinating. To me, a dictionary is the most thrilling book in printed annals. Why should it *not* be, since it chronicles the fates of men—with all the phrase implies? Go down beneath the framework of derivations, definitions and distinctions, and you come to the quivering life-blood of the race. We must not let pedants blind us to that truth.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BEST ENGLISH

THE underlying principles that go to shape English that should be preferred have been touched upon often during the discussions in this book, as the many aspects of the subject have received treatment. But perhaps it may not be amiss, in this final chapter, to draw them together by way of recapitulation, even at the risk of some repetition. Let it be a simple general statement, with much of detail omitted. At the end, unity of impression should be above all coveted, since it means clear understanding. The best English then is simply the English the best handlers of English use. The statement sounds elementary, too easy a way out of the woods. Yet if it be clung to, it will prove a very lamp unto our feet. And such a summary subdivides into two heads: it includes a consideration of the best speakers of the past and of the present, and similarly, of the best writers, whether bygone or contemporary.

In examining the best handlers of English in the past, we see at once that one of our two aspects of English use instantly ceases to exist. For such writers are only those who survive on the printed page, since all the speakers have fallen silent to our ears. And what a loss is there, my countrymen! Could we but hear the colloquial language of an earlier time, listen to the intonation of the voices now choked with dust, catch the infinite gradations of inflection, the nuances of modulation—what a boon it were in our general study of speech! That is why such a registration as Fanny Burney's *Journal,* wherein that sprightly eighteenth-century lady sets down the talk of Sam Johnson, is so precious a find. But—no, we must, in general, learn how our forefathers talked from their speech as it is written down and preserved for us in books. And the loss is doubly realized when we consider that all idiom in its full salt and savor comes from spoken utterance, and that the best written language is that which comes closest to catching the inimitable accent that falls warm from the lips of men.

When the writer is first class, his pen acts as his word of mouth; and we turn to him and linger with him in the recognition of a fundamental linguistic fact: that here, if anywhere, we shall draw nearest to the origin of all idiom—namely, in the mouths

of men. Addison and Steele, for example, were charmingly idiomatic makers of literature. Nobody now living ever heard them talk, no mechanical device to perpetuate their tones existed. But reading those authors in *The Spectator,* we find them so fluent, forceful, felicitous, that we easily are convinced of their standing among the few for the happy use of those turns of expression natural to our English tongue at one of its best periods. Yet nothing is surer than that, if we could have sat with them at the Garrick Club over a bottle of wine, their actual conversation would have differed somewhat from even the most idiomatic of their beloved essays. Their exact speaking use of English is for ever lost to us; we do the best we can with the substitute of the printed page representing their natural way of saying things when a quill was in hand and the printer's devil waited.

And what range, variety, rich divergencies and individualistic departures this idiomatic exhibition displays! As many styles, so it would seem, as there are writers whose genius enables them to hand on to us examples of their instinct for the *mot juste,* their sensibility to the music of sentences, their flashing inventions and their loving revivals of some old word or pregnant phrase, clothed anew with their own personality.

Any man's style depends on a synthesis: the concurrence of his nationality, his period, his training, his personality and the form of Letters he elects to follow and produce. It is thus a very complex thing, and the trouble with almost all scholastic treatment of the problem lies in the silly assumption that style is the direct result of obeying this rule or that, the negative avoidance of a series of "don'ts." No master of literature on the side of expression ever arrived at the front by such an emasculate substitution for the true excellences of artistic speech. That is why those excellences are many sided. Think of the contrast between the eighteenth-century worthies already mentioned, and the large, rugged, vital vernacular of the Elizabethans. Think of the Norman French of fourteenth-century Chaucer qualifying the backbone of his English, which is nevertheless such as to make him the first great artist of English verse. And set beside these the nervous, homely, effective, modern idiom of a Sherwood Anderson in our day, or the seeming simple yet infinitely cunning manner of a George Moore—and you begin to sense the remarkable gamut of English utterance during the thousand years from the Anglo-Saxon chronicles to the present year of grace.

But one thing may always be kept in mind, to clarify the whole subject; English has ever had a

certain way of saying things; and all the changes rung by the centuries of English development in speech use do not depart from that bottom fact. This has been dilated upon in dealing with the genius of the tongue. The authors whom we instinctively recognize as standard are those very authors who, whether by birth, gift, education or instinct have come closest to reporting in their utterance this distinctive, peculiar way of expressing thought through the native tongue. It is true that slang, which often is but idiom in the making, may come and go; each generation, each decade indeed, plays favorites in respect to locutions, turns of speech, manner of expression. But deep down, like the skeleton of an organism the flesh and blood of which is subject to the superficial changes of all living creatures, one may find the English way of saying things, an instinct, a law and an inescapable requirement. Shamelessly do I repeat it here, for it needs saying, in and out of season.

Idiom, therefore, is the precious inheritance personally varied by good writers according to their genius, their aim and the compulsion of their theme. But no writer, however eminent, can afford to say things in a way not English, at bottom.

In considering the best English of the present, we have an advantage over a study of the past in the

fact, pointed out before, that we can study both those who speak and those who write. Current oratory, table-talk of excellence, the language of drama which, with oratory, preserves the oral tradition of speech usage,—these all can aid us in coming to some comprehension of idiom at its best. We have seen how important it is to give close attention to the spoken word. To-day, if we say that somebody "talks like a book," it sounds like a reproach. In all my acquaintance, I recall but two human beings to whom the remark applies. These twain add to the fluidity of the spoken word the heightened elegance and the distinctly increased formality familiar to us in written utterance. To hear some one occasionally speak after such fashion is a refreshing change from the deluge of slovenly expression most of us, in haste, in carelessness, in unconscious return, perhaps, to early bad habits, commonly indulge ourselves in. Nevertheless it may be named one of the genuine contributions of our particular period that we have so daringly handled the vernacular when transplanted to the printed page. We have in our writing more closely imitated the verity of the spoken word than any preceding age: that is our virtue—but also our peril, and often our sin.

In the praiseworthy attempt to destroy the artificiality of the past, to bring spoken and written

idiom together in such blend that the distinction between them well-nigh disappears, we have fallen into the pitfall of incoherence, lack of form, shapeless manipulation of material, and sometimes a sort of shorthand instead of the rounded perfection of utterance that, after all, must distinguish sound writing. We have substituted styleless condensation for style in any true sense. This graceless writing overlooks the fact of the difference between the spoken and written word. To bring them closer together is good, and makes for idiom. But to assume they are literally the same only invites disaster.

The queer jargon used for stage directions in the plays just preceding our immediate day affords illustrative evidence. We owe it to latter-day leaders like Shaw and Barrie that a reform in this respect has been introduced, so that this cryptic special language, outside the dialogue of the play, becomes a vital, agreeable part of the piece as a literary achievement. The kind of writing represented by "enter Brown, upper right entrance, comes down front to chair at left," bids fair to become obsolete under the influence of dramatists who now recognize that their wares are to be purchased in books for the more careful scrutiny of print: an appeal not existing in earlier days, when stage business was indicated primarily for the instruction of the producer or

actor, not for the reader's pleasure. It is thus the business of those interested in sound speech to keep a knowing eye upon the current word, idiom, phrase or larger organic handling of the native tongue, and not to make the mistake of thinking we should only begin the observation and study of expression after it is registered on the printed page. The best oratory or public speaking in forensic debate, in the pulpit, in civic life, in the classroom and on the lecture platform to-day, tends to exhibit the realistic habit of a closer fitting of the thought to the word. This is but part of the general, deep-seated movement of literature toward truth, the stern elimination of the flowery more common in an earlier day.

I have touched earlier on the once admired speeches of orators like Webster, Edward Everett, Rufus Choate and Wendell Phillips (still placed before long-suffering schoolboys as "models"), where a sort of Ciceronian pomp and elegance prevails, often to the injury of that sense of naturalness and spontaneity so precious in securing the effect of living utterance. I once heard a Fourth of July oration by the late Galusha Grow, long-time leader in the national House of Representatives. As a performance it was superb; the way the speaker adorned his sunsets with classical quotations certainly aroused my unfeigned admiration. But to take it seriously was

impossible: in power of persuasion it was as extinct as a retired politician. To-day a trained speaker fairly pelts his hearers with bullet-like Anglo-Saxon monosyllables, getting results by the snap and swift impact of his words.

It was an appreciable part of the late Henry Ward Beecher's power, although his training was in the older oratory, that in contrast with the anemic elegances then current, he displayed commonly in Plymouth pulpit a native simplicity of utterance. His sentences were full of the homely reality of the street and the shop, and for that time so unconventional that he frequently outraged timorous souls in his congregation as they heard sacred matters discussed with such leonine, from-the-shoulder pith and poignancy. It was he who said that when the English language got in his way, it didn't stand the ghost of a show! There is a lesson in the remark.

It is no uncommon experience to fall in with some one at a dinner-table and be attracted by the felicitous idiom of his speech, and later on, getting a letter from him, be amazed by the conventional tameness of his expression. Why is it, I have asked myself. The answer is not far to seek: at table, my acquaintance spoke off-guard, let the speech instincts in his blood have their way with him; as a letter writer, he suffered from linguistic stage

fright. Most of us are that way. Only now and then does a Shelley, a Scott or a Stevenson dare to let go with a pen. In these days of Freudian influence it is well to remember that the most vital effects of our utterance lie in the subconscious. All idiom is born there. Listen to the happy, unforced, natural talk of children at play to be convinced of it. Certainly the moronic ineffectiveness so often found in our college-bred citizens in this matter of sound, forceful, native speech suggests such an explanation. It comes in part from the lack of a wide area of knowledge and conversation, which curtails and impoverishes the speech uses, and equally in part from herd imitation, which at center means mental laziness. It is so much easier to seize on well-worn stock phrases, rather than be independent, individual and creative. Larger ideas and greater play of linguistic facility is what one misses.

It may be added that the average business man seems to regard it as bad form not to fall in with the innumerable speech clichés of his associates. To use happy, unwonted idioms is taken for an objectional mental strut. Yet is it not true that the commercial man equipped with such a vocabulary would gain the top quicker? I have heard more charming speech from carpenters, longshoremen and tramps than often issues from the polite mouths of

so-called trained persons. The half-breeds of culture make you feel that no education is to be preferred to half-education.

Test the writer, then, by the degree in which he carries over into print the life-giving savor and the unbookish ease and grace of spoken idiom. We may never deny that even in the closest imitation of life in art, which is to say, the resemblance of the written word to that which issues from the lips in all the attritions of daily experience, a difference will be desirable. But approximation of the written to the spoken, without forgetting this difference—there you have the beau ideal of the lovely science and art of human utterance. I wish devoutly there were certain houses in this country where one might go with the avowed purpose of listening to, and participating in, fine conversation. Not stilted, formal talk, nothing like that. But a place inheriting the happiest graces of the elder speech, yet aware of the plastic vigor of the latest idiomatic utterance—a blend of the language of the past and present in the service of thoughts fruitfully exchanged. Such a house would become a salon, in the exact meaning of the word.

In short, the best users of English, past or present, speaking or writing, invariably manipulate the tongue in consonance with its genius: the

native and the natural way of saying things. Three factors will always condition individual success in English use: a sense of the historic past, sensibility to contemporary speech color and music, and a literary personality that gives tang to what we call style. Many use English, but few are happy in it. One of the finest definitions of best English ever made is that of James Russell Lowell: "the speech of the people in the mouth of the scholar." Perhaps we may expand it, in the light of the argument here set forth, into something like this: "the speech of the people, in its history and present use, in the mouth of the scholar—when he is a scholar, not a narrow sciolist or pedagogue separating language from literature and literature from life."

THE END